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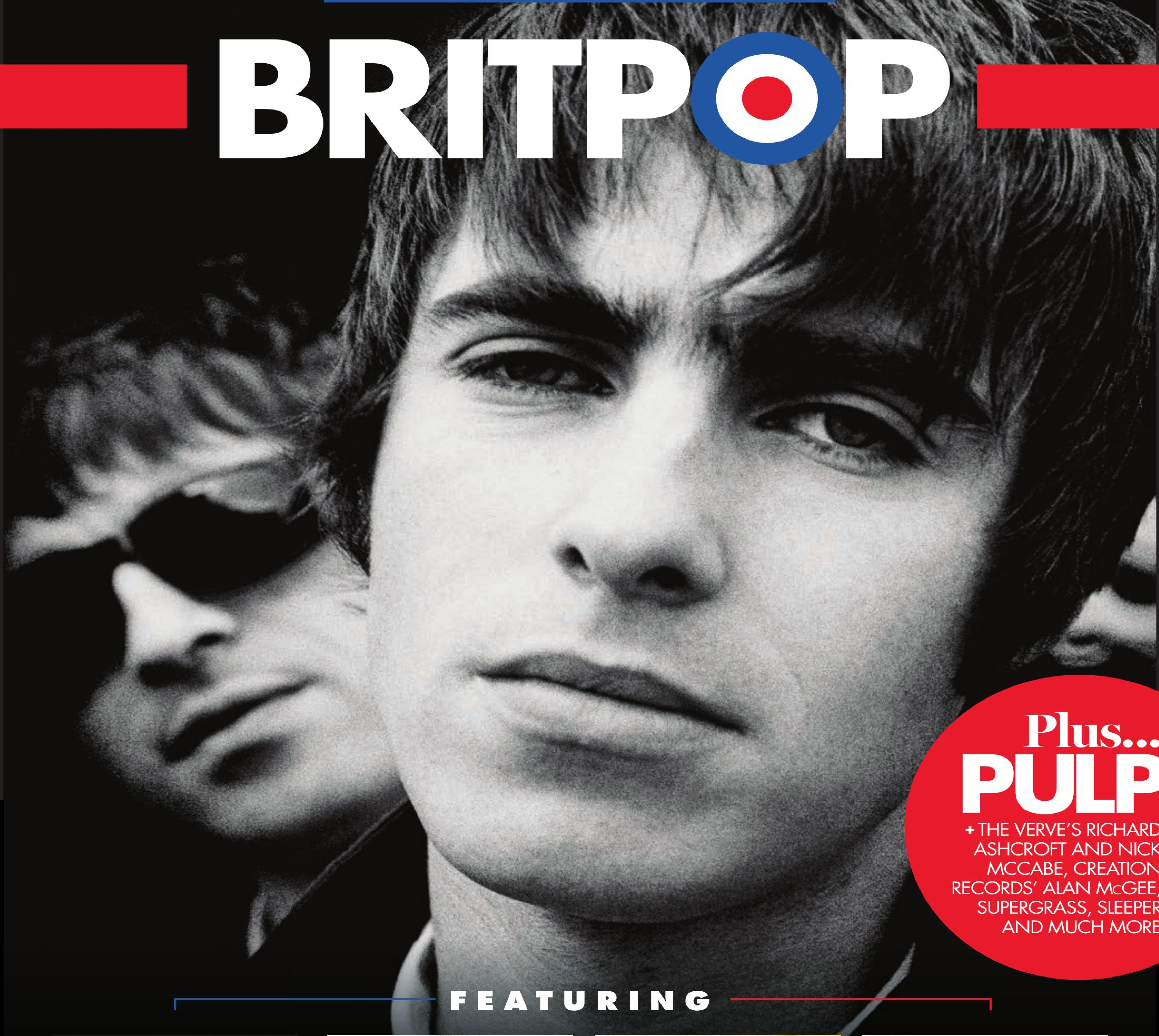
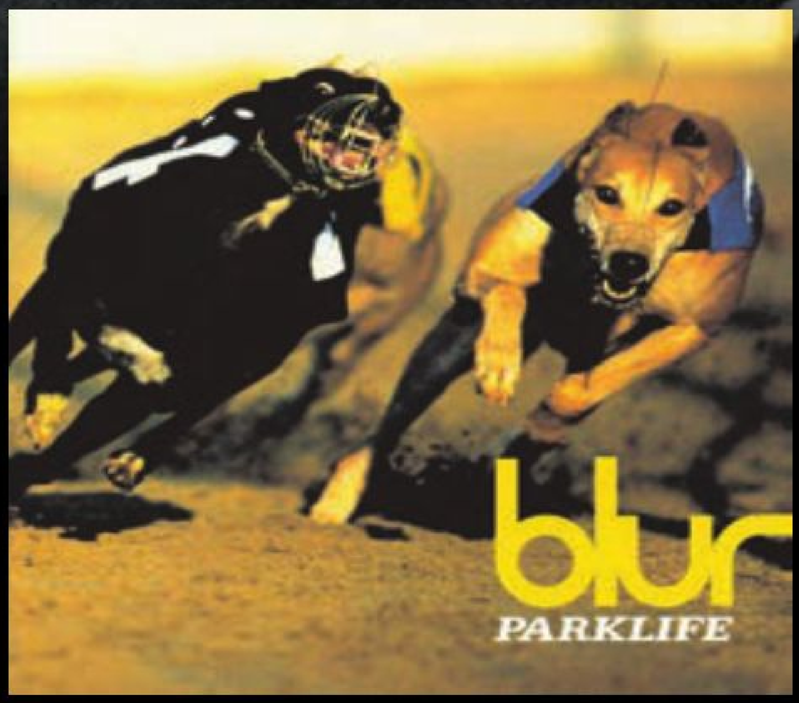


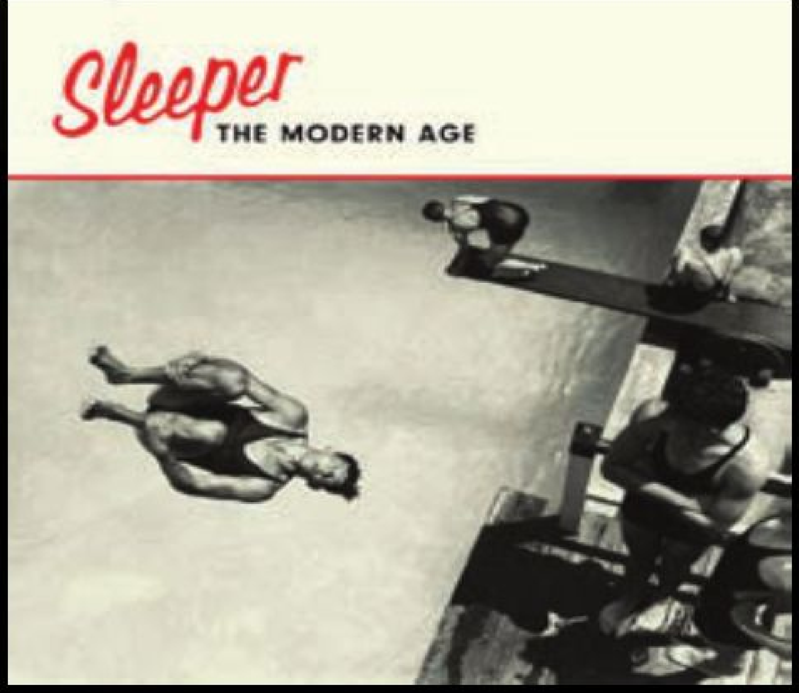
Plus...

PULP

+ THE VERVE'S RICHARD ASHCROFT AND NICK MCCABE, CREATION RECORDS' ALAN McGEE, SUPERGRASS, SLEEPER AND MUCH MORE

FEATURING





EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS + BLUR COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

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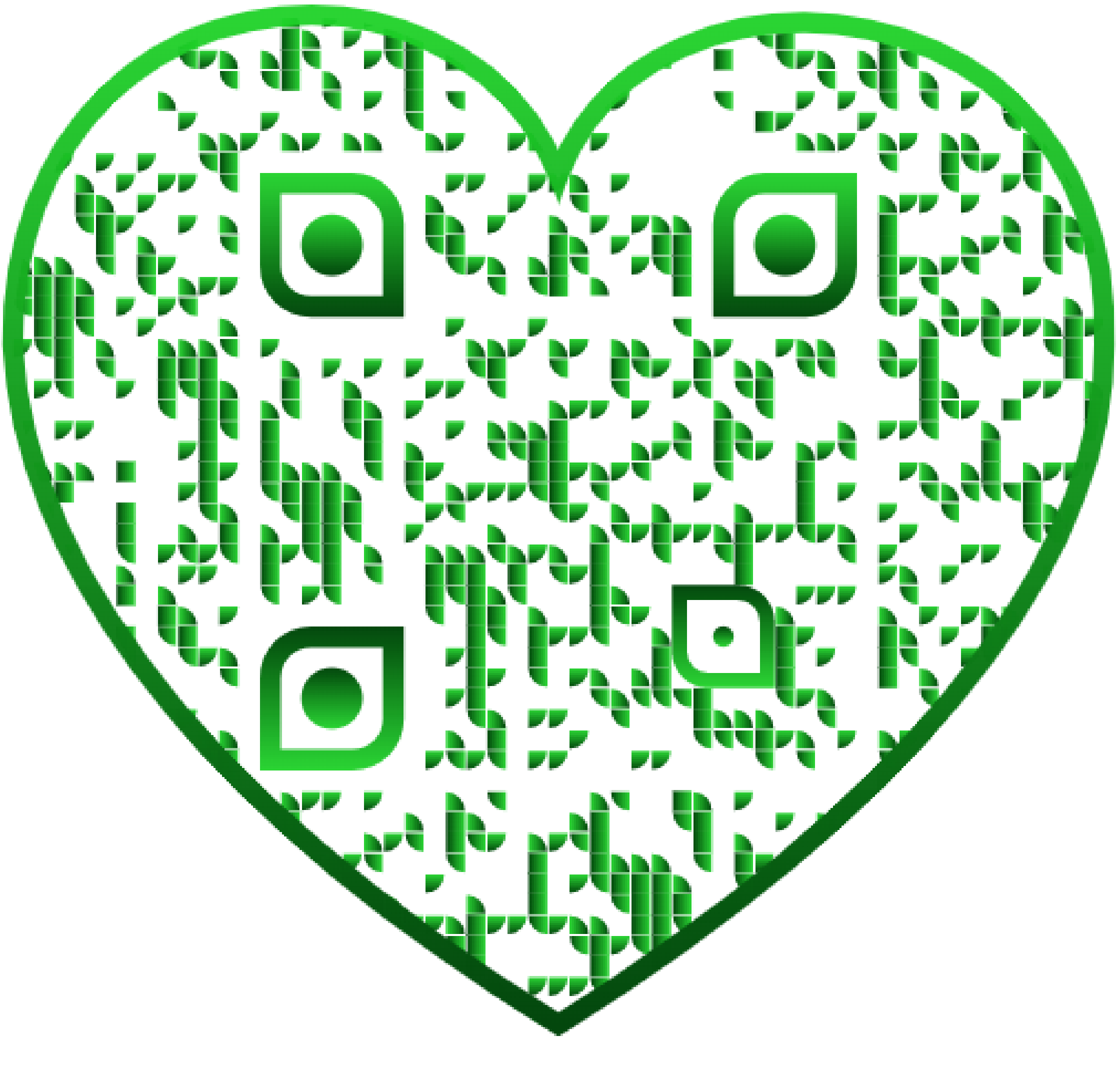

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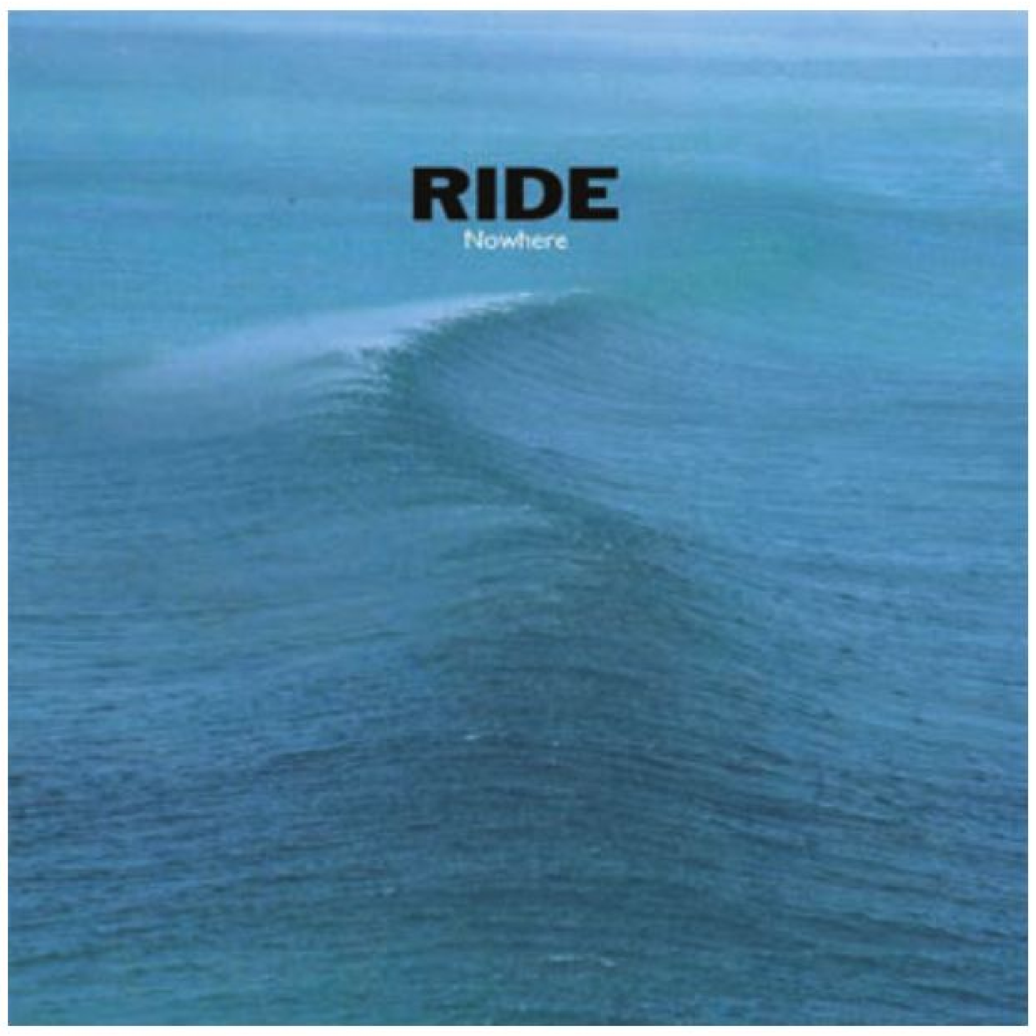

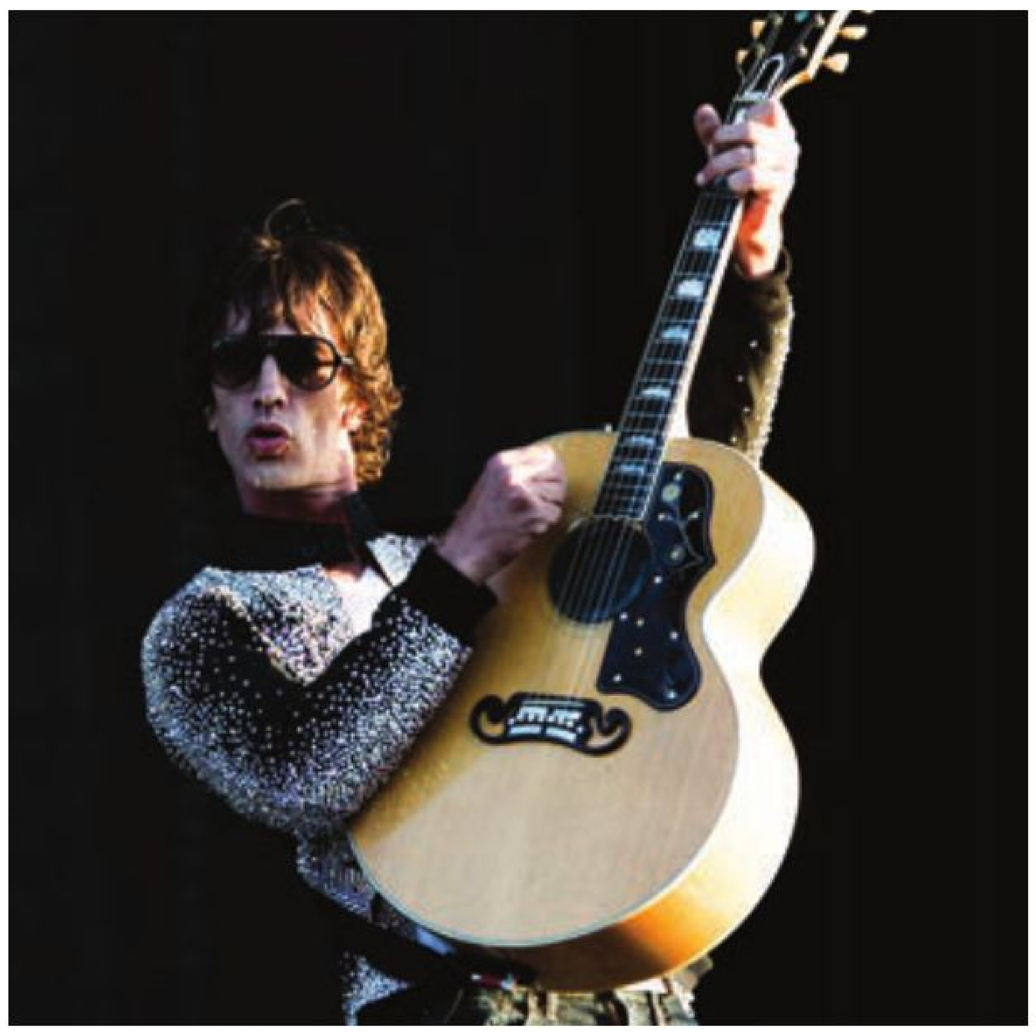

Welcome...

The battle of Oasis versus Blur may be its abiding memory for many, but Britpop was so much more than simply a two-band affair. In fact, for a healthy chunk of the 90s, this joyous Anglocentric celebration of the UK's pop cultural heritage dominated the charts.

Naturally, Oasis and Blur feature heavily in our bite-sized overview of the movement but we also talk to some of the era's other biggest hitters including Alan McGee, The Verve's Richard Ashcroft and Nick McCabe, Ash's Tim Wheeler and Supergrass to get their take on these halcyon days. Strap yourself in, it's one hell of a ride...

Steve Harnell, Editor
Follow me on Twitter: @steve_harnell

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LABELLED WITH LOVE

CREATION RECORDS

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS POSTCARD, RUN BY ALAN HORNE. THEN HE PASSED THE SCOTTISH INDIE–POP BATON ONTO ALAN MCGEE, WHOSE LABEL DOMINATED THE 80S AND 90S, VIA BANDS BOTH GROUNDBREAKING AND POPULAR. THEY ALSO LIKED TO PARTY, WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO THEIR UNDOING. HERE WE SEPARATE CREATION TRUTH FROM MYTH

PAUL LESTER

The 80s and 90s were a golden age for independent record labels – Postcard, Factory, 4AD, Mute, Rough Trade, ZTT – but of all of them, arguably the one that most successfully straddled the two decades was Creation.

It was an auteur project from start to finish – it was founded by Alan McGee (with a little – well, a lot of – help from Dick Green and Joe Foster) – and, in a way, it was his record collection, his crazed dreams and obsessions, writ large.

It soared and crashed as McGee rose and fell himself. It both reflected the developments of the period and effected changes, including as it did in its relentless release schedule some of the landmark records of its time – of any time – culminating in the epochal 1991 triptych of Primal Scream's *Screamadelica*, Teenage Fanclub's *Bandwagonesque* and My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*; three albums that define indie ambition forever.

It began as a cult concern, the meeting place for all manner of eccentric waifs and strays – The Legend!, Momus, Lawrence (Hayward) of Felt – but even at its most esoteric and extreme, Creation struck a chord, bending the populace to its will through the wayward but appealing pop of The Jesus And Mary Chain, The House Of Love, Ride, Sugar, Boo Radleys and Super Furry Animals.

At various points, it was the de facto home of C86 "cutie"/jangling guitar music (The Jasmine Minks, The Bodines, The Weather Prophets), the label that gave us shoegaze (Slowdive, The Telescopes, Swervedriver), the birthplace of acid house/indie–dance and, somehow, the HQ of the biggest band in Britain, if not the world (Oasis).

"It was a random collection of misfits, drug addicts and sociopaths," Pat Fish of The Jazz Butcher proclaimed at the start of the documentary, *Upside Down: The Creation Records Story*. For Bobby Gillespie, the Primals mainstay to whom the film was dedicated, Creation was full of "outsiders, chancers and lunatics". McGee admitted: "I do seem to attract, or am attracted to, nutjobs." As for Joe Foster, summing up this revolutionary imprint, he said: "It started as our grand delusion, and eventually became the mainstream sound of a generation."

Creation literally began in a – or rather, The – Living Room populated by a few dozen likeminds and grew and grew until, within 10 years, its flagship band would inspire half a million believers to congregate in a field in Knebworth, Hertfordshire.

According to Glaswegian McGee, the pivotal moment in the creation of Creation came with his decision, in 1980, to come to London and attend an indie night in Victoria where he saw The Television Personalities, the first band to blow his mind since The Clash. He recalls seeing sometime member Foster onstage, sawing a Rickenbacker guitar in half. McGee was sufficiently moved to traipse to record store Rough Trade the next day and buy all their records.

"I thought, I can do that," McGee said of Dan Treacy's maverick mob. "That's when Creation Records became a reality – without them, there would be no Creation."

McGee began promoting gigs in 1981, when he was 21. He launched The Living Room at The Adams Arms in Central London and it became the club for indie cognoscenti searching for a new scruffy little underground to counterbalance the glossy, glamorous pop and new romantic happening overground. In 1983, McGee quit his day job at British Rail to launch Creation with Foster and associate Dick Green. Their first releases – by music writer Jerry Thackray aka Everett True alias The Legend!, The Revolving Paint Dream, The Jasmine Minks and McGee, Green and Foster's own part-time combo Biff Bang Pow! – were variously peculiar, psych-inflected and scratchily melodic, i.e. of niche interest. But there were

> Even at its most esoteric and extreme, Creation struck a chord, bending the populace to its will through the wayward but appealing pop of The Jesus And Mary Chain, The House Of Love, Ride, Sugar, Boo Radleys and Super Furry Animals

Teenage Fanclub emerged from the Glasgow C86 scene

© Getty Images

TEENAGE FANCLUB

IF ANY BAND WAS GOING TO BREAK CREATION IN THE STATES, IT WAS THE FANNIES. SINGER-GUITARIST RAYMOND MCGINLEY REMEMBERS THE LABEL'S HEYDAY.

Q You must have been in the studio doing *Bandwagonesque* while *Primal Scream* and *My Bloody Valentine* were recording *Screamadelica* and *Loveless*?

I guess. We weren't necessarily Creation's No.1 priority, though. We got what we needed but it was the Primals and the Valentines occupying their consciousness, so they just let us get on with it. That was the good thing about Alan and Dick, we said what we wanted to do and they just paid for it.

Q Were you the classicist rock band next to the Primals' zeitgeist–defining indie dancers and MBV's sonic explorers?

Well, the way you've laid that out is a classic journalistic perspective, but I'm not sure if the bands would have perceived themselves that way. We never had any neatly stitched-up self-image. We weren't thinking of being classicists, just more confident and not scared to be melodic and harmonic.

Q Were the Fannies the naughty kids before Oasis arrived?

I think McGee was frustrated that we wouldn't play up in front of the press. We'd more likely become more sensible. We never wanted to self-mythologise. We'd spent years reading the music papers and bands trying to create a mythology and it seemed a bit pathetic. It was great working with Alex Chilton, who was a lovely guy and had a mythology about him, but to us he was a total gentleman.

Q Was there a sense of you passing on the baton to the Gallaghers?

I wouldn't say that. Noel plainly saw what he wanted to do, and he did it – did it very well. They all seemed like very nice guys. I just can't say I was a fan. I'd rather listen to Tim Buckley – the antithesis of Oasis.

early signs of a broader commercial potential in The Loft's *Why Does The Rain?* from September 1984 and the extreme noise pop of The Jesus And Mary Chain's *Upside Down* from two months later.

"They had the sound, the image and the philosophy – everything was intact," said Gillespie of East Kilbride's feedback scions. McGee was initially unimpressed, but before long he was frothing at the mouth and proclaiming that, together, the Mary Chain and Creation were "going to make millions!"

"It was a brilliant, violent, pop record," McGee said of *Upside Down*. He assumed it would be "a big No.1 hit" in the vein of The Ronettes' *Be My Baby* (the Mary Chain's Reid brothers' avowed intention was to combine garage noise with girl group harmony). And although it didn't quite manage that, it did make the band arguably the most notorious since the Sex Pistols (give or take the concurrent Frankie Goes To Hollywood), helped not a little by the riot at their incendiary (and brief) performance at North London Polytechnic.

"This is truly art as terrorism," declared McGee afterwards, although the band had to take refuge in their dressing room as fired-up audience members pounded on the door with hammers.

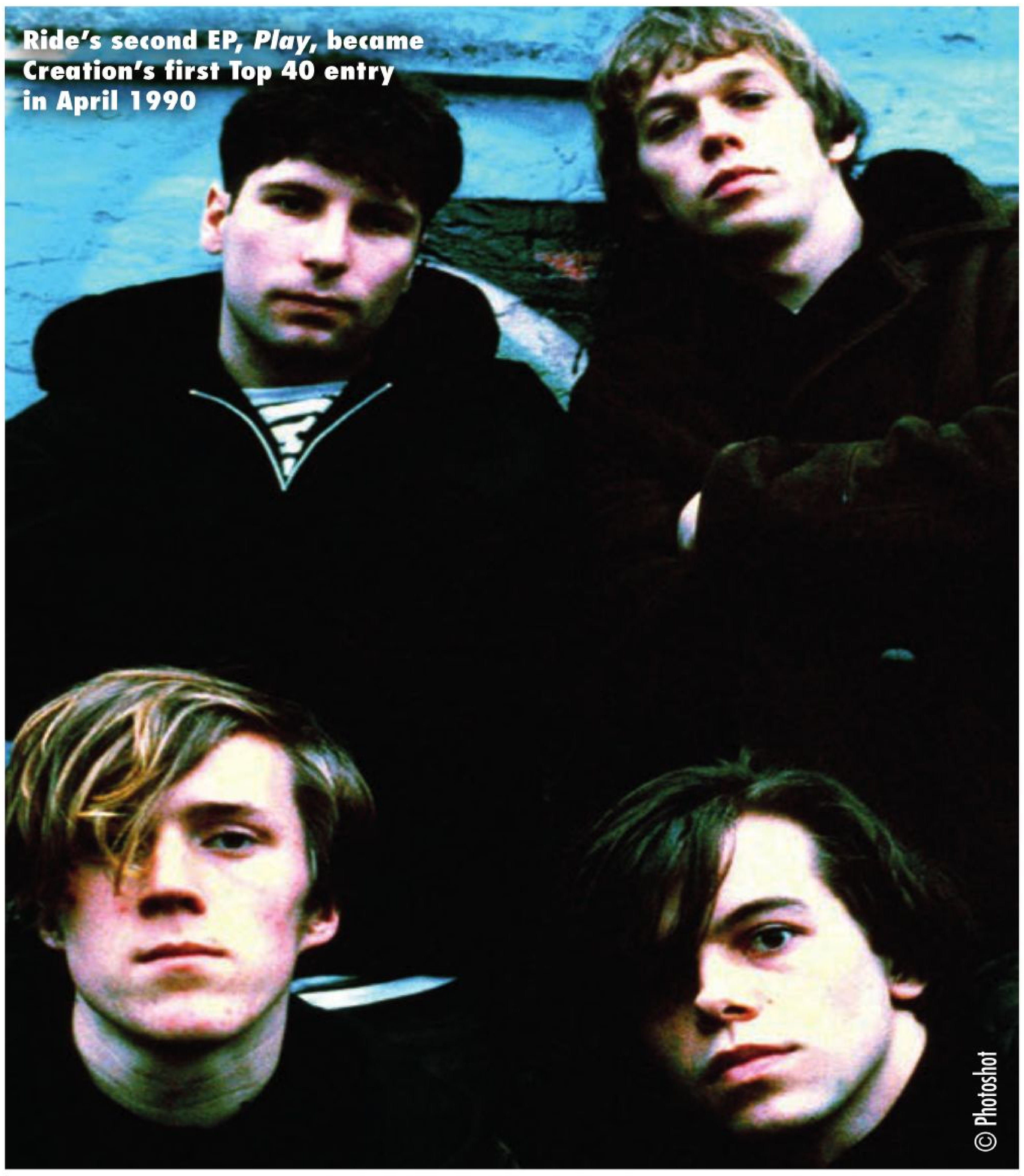
Suddenly, Creation offered an alternative to the cosy mainstream pop consensus provided by Live Aid. From their office – little more than a broom cupboard, really – in Hatton Garden, they set themselves up as the standard bearers of rock'n'roll degeneracy, their ethos encapsulated by Primal Scream, fronted by sometime Mary Chain drummer Gillespie, who seemed to embody, with his Roger McGuinn fringe and pale, skinny frame, every dissolute leather-clad rocker there had ever been.

Creation's first heyday came with the gorgeous Byrdsian jangle-pop of the Primals' *All Fall Down/ It Happens* and *Crystal Crescent/ Velocity Girl*, The Bodines' *Therese/ I Feel*, The Loft's *Up The Hill And Down The Slope*, The Weather Prophets' *Almost Prayed* and The Jasmine Minks' *What's Happening* and *Cold Heart* – together they were a beacon of lustrous indie in that dead zone between the demise of new pop and emergence of acid house.

But with the Mary Chain signed to Warners subsidiary Blanco Y Negro, Creation didn't yet have a hit act, one that could sustain their mad misadventures. Nor did they have one that the press could blazon as radically affecting a break with the past – for all the greatness of their releases to date, they had mainly been glorious upholders of rock tradition rather than signposts to a bold new future.

Enter, circa 1987-88, The House Of Love and My Bloody Valentine. The debut *House Of Love* album signalled a change for Creation. It had that inimitable hazy sound typical of Creation, but it also had well-formed, memorable songs such as *Christine* and *Man To Child*. Not surprisingly, that self-titled debut gave Creation their first chart entry (albeit at No.49) and caused the phone to ring off the hook, with major labels wanting in on the action. More people were employed at Creation HQ, and there was more of a party atmosphere, which suited the band.

> "They were absolutely rock'n'roll animals who put it on that they were mummies boys. I went on tour with them and theirs was the worst behaviour. They were shockingly out of control."
>
> **ALAN MCGEE ON THE HOUSE OF LOVE**



Ride's second EP, *Play*, became Creation's first Top 40 entry in April 1990

© Photoshot

RIDE

COMBINING TEEN PIN-UP APPEAL WITH POST–MBV NOISE–POP EXPERIMENTALISM, RIDE WERE CREATION'S ENTREE INTO THE CHARTS. MARK GARDENER LOOKS BACK…

Q Were you the bridge between shoegaze Creation and commercial Creation?
Yes, we were the first lot to start hitting the charts for them. When we first met Noel [Gallagher] he told us he had [Ride track] *OX4* on his answerphone, which was good.

Q Were Ride Creation's noise-pop boyband?
A little bit. In our mind we were arty, like Sonic Youth. We weren't ashamed of the "p" word, but we felt awkward with certain videos. There were forces at work when we were younger and prettier when these aspects were played on and we were uncomfortable with them.

Q Do you think Ride were the darlings of the music press?
Yeah, and for a while that was great. We were so young – 19/20/21 – but also aware that the tide would turn, which it did… But it was an amazing time. The parties at Creation would last all weekend. I'd hang out with Alan [McGee] a lot. There were nights I'd be used as "bait" [i.e. as a babe-magnet] and we'd carry on the party at Alan's. But that was alright – I was high at the time anyway. If you were going to experiment with pills, they weren't bad people to do it with.

Q Was Creation essentially an auteur record label?
A bit. Alan believed in the people and got to know them. He knew our band – he'd seen me off my head, and I'd seen him off his. There were no layers. But what made Ride great and Creation great was also what made them crash – made them unsustainable. But we created something that stood the test of time, and that's all you can hope for, really.

THE WEATHER PROPHETS

PETE ASTOR WAS CREATION'S FIRST GREAT WHITE HOPE, FIRST WITH THE LOFT AND THEN WITH THE WEATHER PROPHETS. THE LATTER'S ALMOST PRAYED WAS ONE OF THE LABEL'S EARLY INDIE HITS.

Pete Astor, who these days teaches Music at Westminster University and still performs live, agrees that Creation had three discrete ages: the C86 era, the imperial phase of *Screamadelica*, *Bandwagonesque* and *Loveless*, and the Oasis years. He agrees that, give or take the Mary Chain, and before the arrival of Guy Chadwick and The House Of Love, he was the most hyped figure of that first period. Not that his early-godhead status lasted very long.

"I remember talking to Guy Chadwick's wife at a Creation party and she asked me, 'Who are you?' There happened to be a framed *NME* cover with me on it on the wall so I pointed at that and said, 'That's me.'" He laughs. "Then it fell off the wall by accident.

"I went back into the office soon after and noticed they hadn't put it back up – and they never did. It was the change of the guard; a symbolic moment."

He acknowledges that Alan McGee made a habit of bigging

up his latest signings ("He did it with millions of people"), but the fact is, Creation's majordomo liked Astor's ambition. Sadly, despite being one of only a few signings to Elevation – the label briefly set up as a joint indie-major venture by WEA and Creation – The Weather Prophets never quite achieved crossover success.

Perhaps this is why James Dean Bradfield of Manic Street Preachers has described them as "the best guitar group who never sold a million". And who was in the audience at shows by Astor's previous band The Loft? None other than the nascent Stone Roses. Despite being part of a mooted mid-80s revival of rock values in the wake of synthpop and new pop, Astor's drummer was actually a member of early-80s white funkateers Funkapolitan, whose brilliant 1981 near-hit, *As The Time Goes By*, was produced by August "Kid Creole" Darnell.

"Dave Morgan was an amazing funky drummer," says Astor, who in 1990 played melodica on Saint Etienne's debut single *Only Love Can Break Your Heart*. "And I was obsessed with James Brown."

File under: misunderstood. So how hurtful was it when he got supplanted by The House Of Love?

"Well, their album was better than ours," he admits. "Ours was okay but a bit muddled. Theirs was more coherent. But I'm proud to have been involved with Creation and pleasantly surprised that people still give a shit!"

"They were absolutely rock'n'roll animals who put it on that they were mummies boys," said McGee of THOL, who boasted a Morrissey & Marr-style writing partnership in frontman Guy Chadwick and mercurial guitarist Terry Bickers and had about them a deceptively austere air. "I went on tour with them and theirs was the worst behaviour. They were shockingly out of control," McGee said of Chadwick, who liked a drink and admitted he "couldn't cope with fame", and Bickers, who was soon suffering from nervous exhaustion combined with drug psychosis. Despite the mania, McGee managed to secure THOL a deal with Fontana, one of many majors in awe of the ginger Scot's A&R foresight.

As for My Bloody Valentine, long dismissed as fey janglers, they seemed to dramatically metamorphose overnight. They issued the seismic *You Made Me Realise* EP, which single-handedly changed the sound of the electric guitar and, as per Jimi Hendrix before them, offered a whole index of possibilities for the tired instrument. The subsequent *Feed Me With Your Kiss* EP and *Isn't Anything* album confirmed MBV mainman Kevin Shields as the premier guitar/studio sorcerer of his generation.

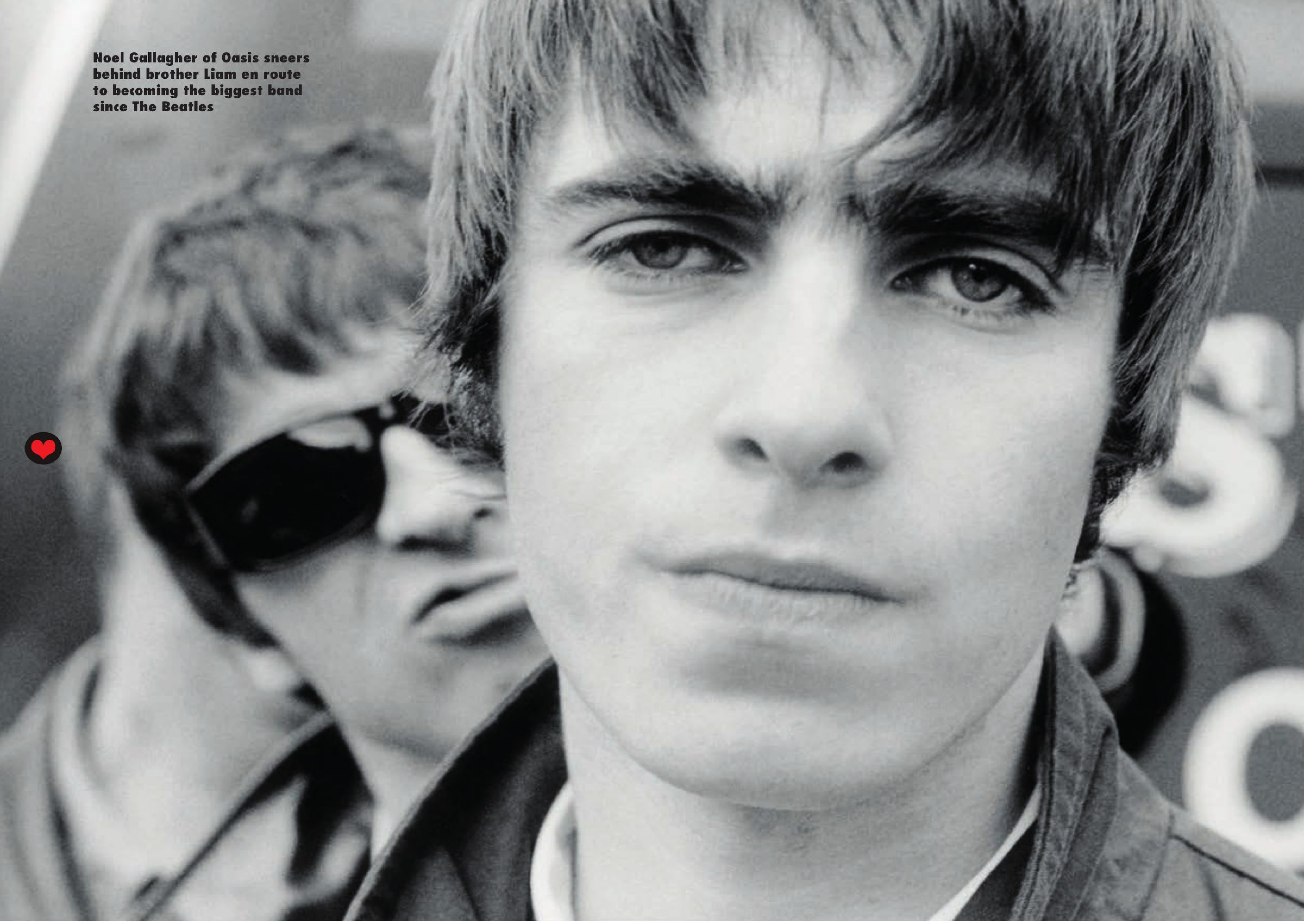
"They went up about five levels with *Isn't Anything*," said Bob Stanley of Saint Etienne, who were managed by McGee and later signed to the label.

Isn't Anything made Creation the natural home for aspiring "shoegazers" – the term ascribed to musicians fixated on the fx pedals at their feet. Ride, The Boo Radleys, Slowdive, The Telescopes and Swervedriver (who were a sort of UK take on America's Husker Du/ Dinosaur Jr/ Sonic Youth axis) all signed, with Oxford's fab four, fronted by the luscious-lipped Mark Gardener, deemed the ones most likely to achieve mainstream success with that drone-pop sound. Indeed, Ride's second EP, *Play*, became Creation's first Top 40 entry in April 1990.

Meanwhile, since 1987-88, acid house had been raging (or rather, raving)

My Bloody Valentine, featuring Kevin Shields, Debbie Googe, Colm O'Ciosoig and Bilinda Butcher, released the *You Made Me Realise* EP in 1988

© Getty Images



Noel Gallagher of Oasis sneers behind brother Liam en route to becoming the biggest band since The Beatles

across Britain, but its ethos – its beats, loops and attendant ecstasy-fuelled smiley culture – had yet to infiltrate Creation. That eventually happened in 1989 when, bored at an indie club in Manchester, McGee and crew decamped to the Hacienda, where he had "an epiphany" as he witnessed several hundred revellers, led by Happy Mondays' gurning totem Shaun Ryder, going "absolutely mental" to the electronic pulse of music born in Chicago and Detroit.

As a result, McGee temporarily moved to Manchester, where they had, he joked, "a better class of drugs", and he introduced the new dance motion to Gillespie, believing it would work for Primal Scream.

Cue the February 1990 single *Loaded*, an Andrew Weatherall remix of an earlier Primals track called *I'm Losing More Than I'll Ever Have*. According to early Mary Chain bassist turned video director Douglas Hart: "Acid house reinvented Creation; it reinvigorated it."

It also turned Creation into the music business version of Babylon. "That's when it really went off the hook and the party really started," said an onlooker of the label's offices in Hackney, a series of mazes and staircases that became the scene of all manner of chaos. Somehow, though, they still managed to get the job done, mainly thanks to stabilising force Dick Green.

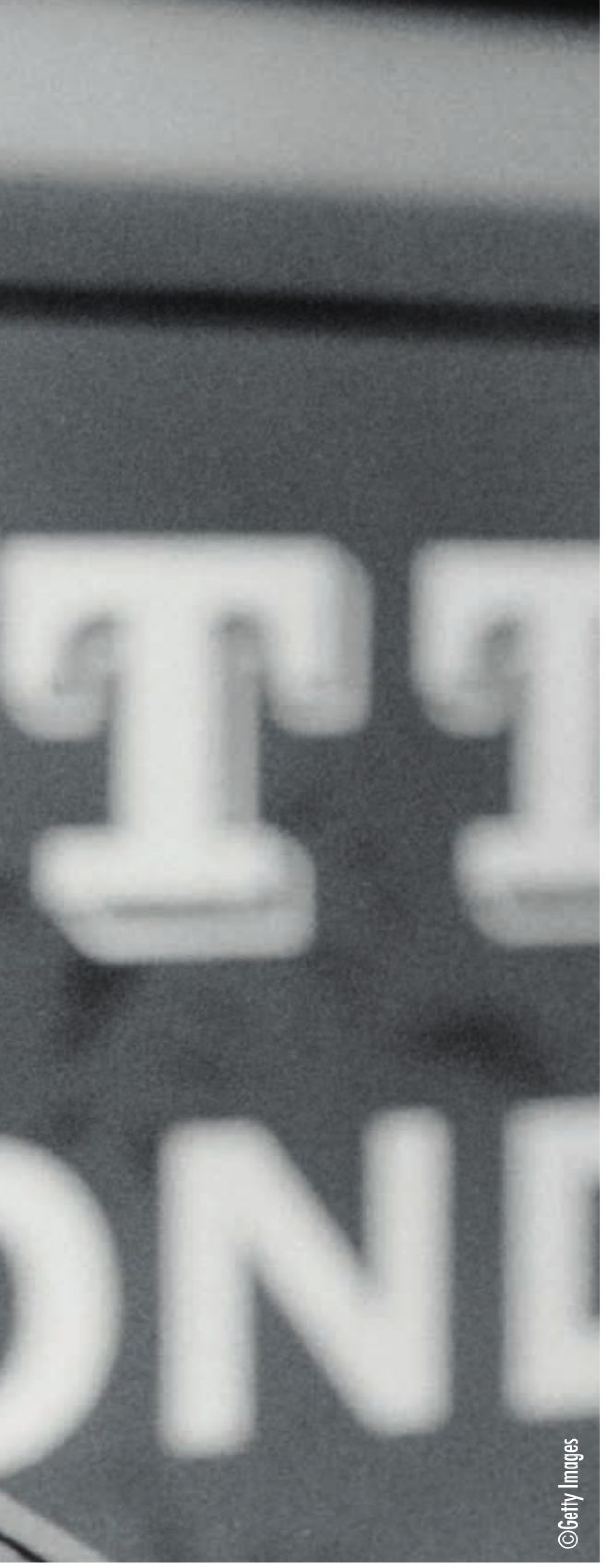
Loaded made McGee's dream come true: Primal Scream on *Top Of The Pops*, beamed into millions of homes. It was also the record that allowed Primal Scream to truly explore Gillespie's, and McGee's, record collections, and their shared love of punk, dub, disco, country, krautrock, free jazz, PiL and Lee Perry, Big Star and Beach Boys, on the seminal *Screamadelica*, which dazzled the critics in September 1991 and was voted Album of the Year by *NME*. "It summed up that whole era for a generation," proclaimed New Order's Peter Hook.

> The Stone Roses may have been what the world was waiting for, in theory, but it was Oasis who put it into practice. They were phenomenally successful and became the biggest band since The Beatles, sparking the Britpop movement

Within two months, Teenage Fanclub had issued *Bandwagonesque* – US magazine *Spin*'s Album of the Year and the long-player most likely to sell Creation to America – and My Bloody Valentine had released *Loveless*, whose protracted recording brought McGee to the brink of a breakdown and was regarded as the ultimate in electric guitar wizardry.

"It was the last great rock record," McGee said later. "It's all been going backwards since."

With the Primals', TFC's and MBV's respective masterpieces, Creation were higher than the sun.



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And yet the ever-prescient McGee could see the downer coming. "Even though I was on a lot of drugs. I knew that this was the peak," he said. "If it got any better it would be pretty strange."

It would be hard to dispute that this was Creation's creative apotheosis. But their commercial zenith didn't come for another three years, following the selling of the label to Sony and subsequent arrival of Oasis. Both events were well-timed: Creation were on the verge of bankruptcy after years of profligacy and McGee indulging his every musical whim, with rampant signings and expensive studio bills, not to mention the assorted pills, thrills and bellyaches.

"Their ambition outstripped their financial income," said Gillespie. "They were winging it all the time." Fortunately for Creation they had in Noel Gallagher one of the great populist songsmiths, and in his brother Liam one of the great British frontmen.

The Stone Roses may have been what the world was waiting for, in theory, but it was Oasis who put it into practice. They were phenomenally successful and – on the back of million-selling albums *Definitely Maybe* (1994) and *(What's The Story) Morning Glory?* (1995) – became the biggest band since The Beatles, sparking the Britpop movement. Unfortunately, McGee largely missed the moment Creation achieved world domination because he was too busy taking drugs. "I was partying for six years," as he put it.

He pulled himself back from the edge, only to replace necking pharmaceuticals with another mania: acquiring acts. There were, in Creation's final days, some good signings – notably, Super Furry Animals – amid legions of dubious ones (Mishka, Ruby, Adorable, Arnold, Idha – the list is endless). But by the late-90s Creation had become everything it despised: a corporate leviathan run as a proxy by Sony, treating music as commodity not life-changing art. There was one final blowout – 2000's *XTRMNTR*, Primal Scream's second great distillation of Gillespie and McGee's favourite extreme music – released just after the label was dissolved, in early 2000.

"It was unsustainable," is Mark Gardener's estimation of what caused Creation to crash. "There was a sense of what goes up must come down. It was all a bit bonkers. Sooner or later that catches up with you and starts to fall apart."

Still, for 15 years or so, what McGee called "the ultimate fucked-up family" made some of the greatest records, indie or otherwise. Records that will, in the immortal words of Noel G, live forever.

● ***Artifact: The Dawn Of Creation Records* is out now on Cherry Red.**

The Lilac Time's sole release on Creation was *Astronauts* in 1991

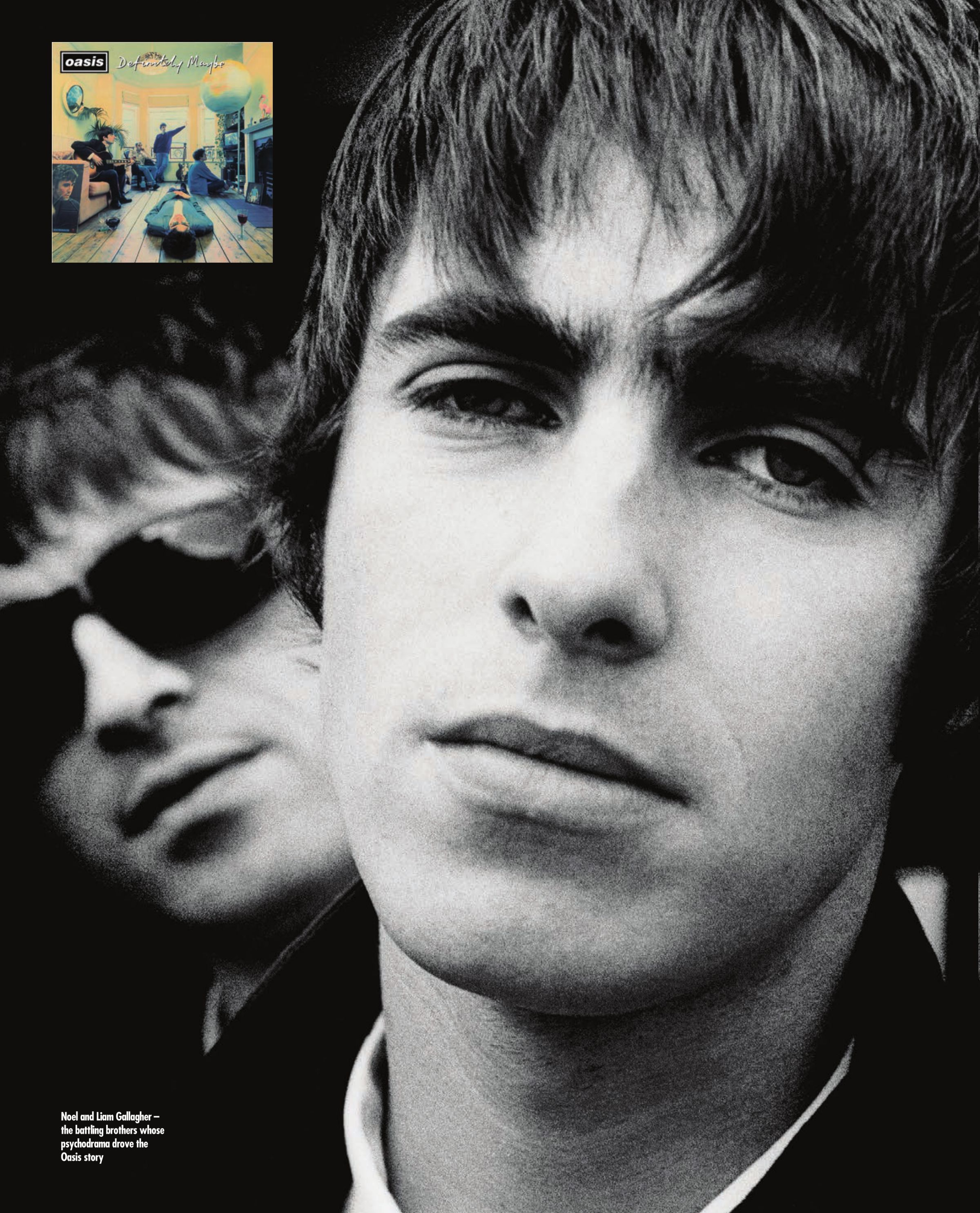
THE LILAC TIME

THE LILAC TIME, WERE AMERICANA BEFORE IT EXISTED. STEPHEN DUFFY DISCUSSES BEING MANAGED BY ALAN MCGEE, HIS ALBUM FOR CREATION, AND ROBBIE WILLIAMS.

Q How did you meet McGee?
Through David Bates, [A&R] at Fontana. I was introduced to Alan and we got on like a house on fire. But it was a terrible idea, because he wasn't doing anything in America. *Paradise Circus* [The Lilac Time's second album] had just gone Top 10 in the US college charts, we'd made this album with [XTC's] Andy Partridge [1990's *& Love For All*], then suddenly Alan started managing us and making us play dates in Scotland. We ended up nearly killing each other, and we split up before our Creation album [1991's *Astronauts*] even came out.

Q What was he like at this point?
Creation was just running on fumes – they weren't just broke, they were massively in debt. Ride saved them. They were making no money, and yet here they were, making *Screamadelica* and *Loveless*. But Alan was great fun, and so enthusiastic about everything. There was a party where I apparently carried him up a ladder to an attic, but I don't remember – maybe he was carrying me. It was that second wave of ecstasy. I was an incredibly old 31 – at least five months older than Alan.

Q And then you worked with Robbie Williams (on 2005's *Intensive Care* album)...
Luckily, we were on the same medication and both incredibly depressed. He was listening to a lot of Smiths – he was a massive Morrissey fan. We were going to do the Brits one year, Robbie and Morrissey, a duet of *Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better*. We ended up doing *Angels* with Joss Stone. That sums it up: one minute you're going to do something extraordinary, the next you're doing the worst terrible thing. I was just lucky to be making records in the 80s when there was money falling out of the sky, and no focus groups, no anything. What a great time that was.



Noel and Liam Gallagher – the battling brothers whose psychodrama drove the Oasis story

IT'S JUST ROCK 'N' ROLL

25 YEARS OF DEFINITELY MAYBE

From the moment Oasis were spotted by Creation Records boss Alan McGee as the support act at King Tut's Wah Wah Hut in May 1993, their rise looked unstoppable. Debut album *Definitely Maybe* is a seven-million-selling classic. But, speaking to key contributors, John Earls discovers how it could have been so very different…

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY © GETTY IMAGES

The smart casual years: (L-R) Tony McCarroll, Paul 'Bonehead' Arthurs, Noel, Liam, Paul 'Guigsy' McGuigan,

"Oasis were that generation's Beatles." It's hard to argue with Creation head Alan McGee's words. From the moment Oasis swaggered out of Manchester with *Supersonic*, they sounded and crucially looked like the band the post-grunge scene had been heading towards. Suede, Pulp and Blur had laid the groundwork for a band to define the optimism and clarity indie had found for itself. In the Gallagher brothers, Oasis had two sensational personalities, a partnership to rival Lennon & McCartney and Jagger & Richards.

Or so it seems in retrospect. "I never saw it coming," McGee tells *Long Live Vinyl*. "When I initially signed Oasis, I thought maybe they'd nick some of The Stone Roses' audience. I didn't see them as any bigger than that. If we were lucky, we might get a gold disc and Oasis might stick around long enough to make a second album."

Oasis' gigs were sensational. Once the music press caught on, mainly after an incendiary show at industry testing ground pub The Water Rats in King's Cross, the aim was simple: bottle the energy of those concerts, pick any 12 of the 50 songs Noel Gallagher had stored up and see just how many Stone Roses fans could be converted. "Oasis' gigs were so powerful," says Mark Coyle, Noel's friend since they were both Inspiral Carpets roadies. "The gigs were like the album times 10."

At the end of 1993, Oasis began work with The Sensational Alex Harvey Band producer Dave Batchelor at the residential studios Monnow Valley in Monmouthsire. He'd befriended Noel while mixing the Inspirals. "Over a spliff, Noel told Dave, 'If Oasis ever make a record, you'll be producing it'," McGee recalls. "Dave producing the first version of the album was Noel keeping his word." Once in charge, however, Batchelor's old-school methods of recording soon jarred.

MARK COYLE: "Dave was a nice guy, but he was too advanced for what the band were at the time. They were all in separate booths, in isolation from each other with headphones on, and it made for a flat recording. As the session went on, it felt more and more tense, as the band realised it wasn't working."

ALAN MCGEE: "I thought what Dave did was rubbish. Noel was very loyal, saying Dave would get it right next time. I had to tell him, 'We don't have a next time. We have to get it right this time'."

MARK COYLE: "*Slide Away* comes from Dave's sessions, and that's one of the best anthemic love songs ever. The line of Dave getting it right or wrong must have been pretty fine, but the rest of his stuff just didn't represent Oasis. As a complete album, it was a no-no. But there were good moments there, and the songs that became *(What's The Story) Morning Glory?* were kicked around and jammed at Monnow Valley."

"WHEN I INITIALLY SIGNED OASIS, I THOUGHT MAYBE THEY'D NICK SOME OF THE STONE ROSES' AUDIENCE" **ALAN MCGEE**

Noel and Liam's photoshoot at a Tokyo hotel in September 1994

Oasis live at the Astoria in London, 19 August 1994

CHANGE OF PLAN

Over dinner with McGee and Oasis manager Marcus Russell, Noel and Coyle, who had engineered the Dave Batchelor sessions, found themselves asked to take over as producers.

MARK COYLE: "I give Alan a lot of credit for trusting me and Noel to get it right. Being passed the reins on that record, when you don't really know what you're doing, was a funny situation to be in. For a band of that potential, you'd think you'd want a producer with a long track record. But we'd tried that with Dave Batchelor and it had been horrible, just alien for everyone. We wanted it the way we understood it from Oasis' gigs: just the band and me. I'd recorded their gigs from day one."

ALAN MCGEE: "When it didn't work out with Dave, I wasn't as worried as maybe I should have been. I thought, 'OK, let's just put Coyley in there'. Mark played as big a part as anybody on *Definitely Maybe*, because he had the trust of the band. Having that band trust you was a big deal. And once we put Anjali Dutt in there to engineer it, it wasn't a risk. Anjali is a genius."

Having worked with Spacemen 3 and Swervedriver, Anjali Dutt had engineered the mammoth sessions for My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless*. Since then, she'd worked with Creation acts from The Boo Radleys to 18 Wheeler.

ANJALI DUTT: "I came on board to a really, really weird situation at the end of the Dave Batchelor sessions. I went to Olympic Studios in Barnes, having been told, 'Listen to it and tell us if you think it can be saved'. I got there to see a lot of anxious men, putting up faders, asking me, 'What do you think?' I wasn't sure what answer I was meant to give, so I was just honest and said, 'Why don't you cut your losses and start again?' Which, fortunately, seemed to be what they wanted to hear. It was clear there were a lot of hopes for this record; that it wasn't a typical indie album. So Oasis started again, except this time, we had to go to Cornwall."

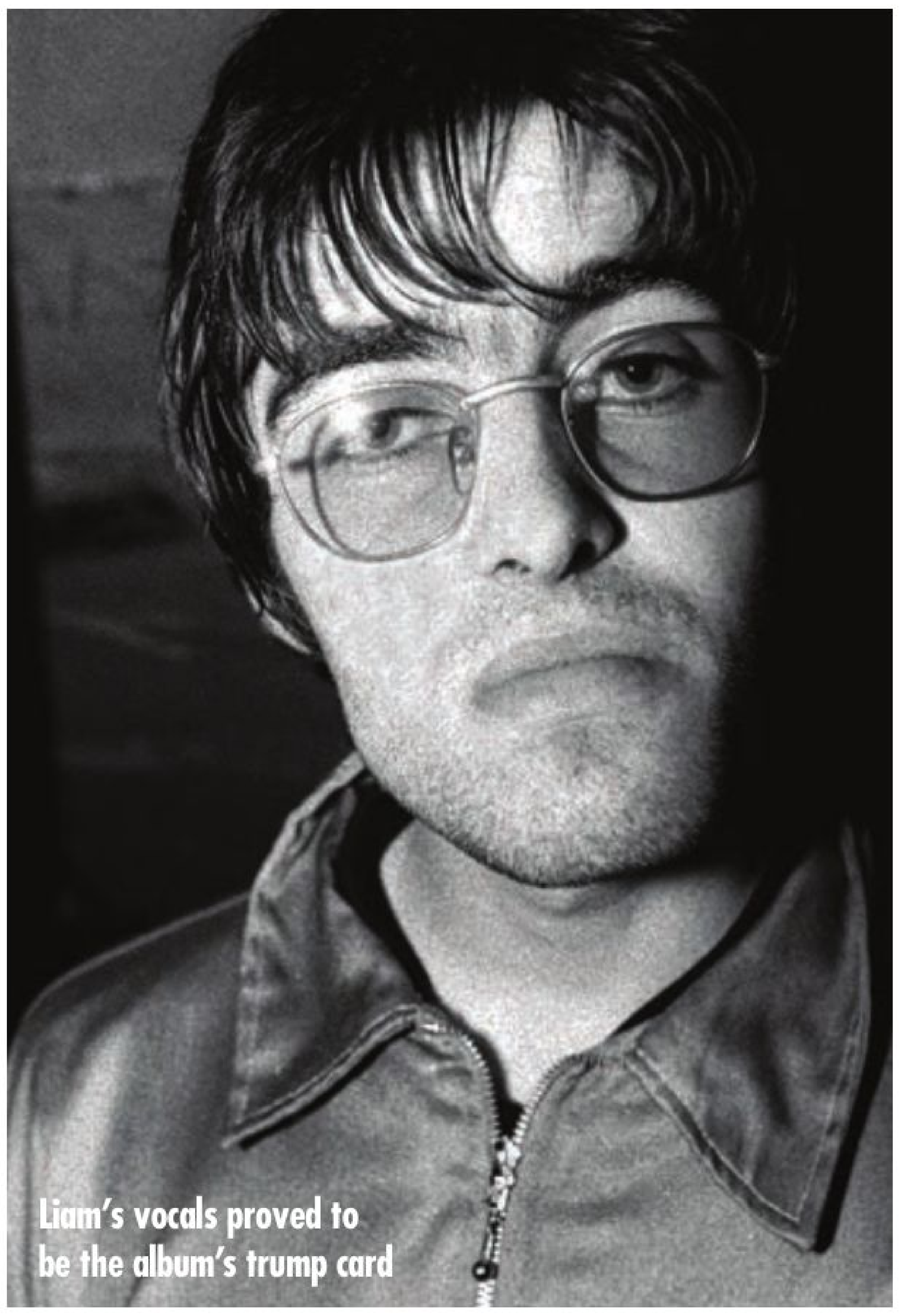
BE KERNOW

In January 1994, Oasis decamped to Sawmills Studios in Cornwall. Another residential studio, where The Verve had recorded *A Storm In Heaven* the previous year, it was so remote that the nearest pub was only accessible via walking along train lines. It was easier to ship kegs of beer over on a boat, which could only be sailed when the tide was in. Housing a group as volatile as Oasis somewhere so remote seemed a big risk.

MARK COYLE: "The band were intensely funny. They were wild, but professional too. Things were unfolding in front of them. Never mind *Definitely Maybe*, they had the next album pretty much worked out, too. They were great days, full of invention and full of life, with a band ready to explode."

"THEY WERE GREAT DAYS, FULL OF INVENTION AND FULL OF LIFE, WITH A BAND READY TO EXPLODE" **MARK COYLE**

ANJALI DUTT: "I'd only met Noel and Mark, who were in their mid-20s. I hadn't realised Liam, Tony and Guigsy were teenagers. When the band turned up on the first evening, it was like the school trip had burst in. I'd worked with sophisticated bands with nice catering, but they were going, 'We can't eat this stuff! Can we have bangers and mash?'"
MARK COYLE: "The first thing I decided was to set the studio up as if it was a gig. They were close together so that they could see each other and hear everything, as if it was a rehearsal. They knew the songs very well anyway, so it was comfortable for them."
ANJALI DUTT: "Noel was excited to be in a studio. He'd be up early, and he was a one-man band who could play drums, bass and guitars. Him and Mark were different from the rest, the others wouldn't wake up for ages and were, 'What's for dinner?' They'd be on PlayStation or watching TV. The whole album would have been done much quicker with Noel playing every single part, but it wouldn't have sounded like Oasis. There was something really exciting about seeing Oasis play all at once."
ALAN MCGEE: "The rest of the band, apart from Noel and Liam, get slagged off, but they were great, especially Bonehead. He's not a lead guitarist, but he's a fucking great rhythm guitar player. They were all essential, really. Tony was a punk drummer. I don't know if he'd have worked out on *What's The Story*, but he was right for that first record."
ANJALI DUTT: "I think Tony was really good, but there was low-level bullying towards him, where they'd ask me, 'Isn't he crap?' How good was he meant to be? It's not like he'd had expensive drum lessons, and when you're not rich, being a drummer is a big deal, as a drumkit takes up so much room. But there's


Liam's vocals proved to be the album's trump card

PART OF THE MASTERPLAN

From *Take Me Away* on the flipside of *Supersonic* onwards, Oasis immediately established themselves as one of the all-time classic B-sides bands. Songs other bands would kill to have as singles, such as *Cigarettes And Alcohol*'s *Fade Away*, soon followed. It's a profligacy Alan McGee regrets.

"People say to me, 'You did a good job there' and I sold a lot of records, but I should have done better," McGee admits. "I shouldn't have given those songs away as B-sides. That was me not doing my job, as me, Noel and Liam got cocky. The quality of songs Noel was writing around *Definitely Maybe*, we thought that was going to go on forever. But, of course, it was transient and they were only human beings."

He particularly regrets how *The Masterplan* was later released, saying: "That wasn't even a B-side. It was the fourth song on the *Wonderwall* CD single, and that's madness! That B-sides compilation *The Masterplan* should have been Oasis' third album. But in some ways, the quality has gone on forever, because here we are, 25 years later, still talking about them."

SUPERSONIC
11 APRIL, 1994 CRE 176

Having smashed open the door with the swaggering rock 'n' roll drama of their first single, B-side *Take Me Away* was the first evidence of both Noel's deft ability to write a universal ballad and to take the lead, assuming the lead vocal and strumming an acoustic guitar alone. The 12-inch adds a live recording of the joyful *I Will Believe*, with the CD single including the white label version of *Columbia*. Copies of the 12-inch promo have sold for up to £100.
DISCOGS £42

LIVE FOREVER
8 AUGUST, 1994 CRE 185

One of the band's greatest songs, *Live Forever* preceded the album's release by three weeks, sneaking into the UK Top 10. The trend of Noel taking the B-side continued, with an acoustic version of *Up In The Sky*. The full-band *Cloudburst* appears on the 12-inch, with the CD including a live version of *Supersonic*. Numbered limited-edition versions of the 7-inch fetch on average £40 on Discogs, with the 12-inch promo selling for anything from £30-£100.
DISCOGS £40

SHAKERMAKER

13 JUNE, 1994
CRE 182
Unusually long for an Oasis single and namechecking Manchester record shop Sifters, *Shakermaker* lacked the incendiary power of the album's first 7-inch, *Supersonic*. Its B-side, *D'Yer Wanna Be A Spaceman?*, has an understated charm, Noel again appearing alone with his acoustic. An 8-track demo of *Alive*, sung by Liam, appears on the 12-inch, with promos commanding up to £130. A misprint of the 7-inch, with both sides labelled as the B-Side, is very rare. You'll need to buy the CD version for a scintillating live cut of *Bring It On Down*.
DISCOGS £32

CIGARETTES & ALCOHOL

10 OCT, 1994
CRE 190
The band's second Top 10 hit boasted the most stellar collection of B-sides of any of the album's singles. An eight-minute assault on The Beatles' *I Am The Walrus* appeared on the 7-inch, credited as being recorded at Glasgow Cathouse, but it was later explained that "Contrary to previous credits, *I Am The Walrus* was recorded at a conference of Sony executives, gathered to hear Creation's new signings." *Listen Up* and *Fade Away*, on the CD version, were both included in *The Masterplan*'s tracklisting. A 12-inch promo limited to 300 copies commands as much as £200.
DISCOGS £30

Noel's treasure trove of songs meant the band were never short of material for their debut album

a tendency to bully the people you went to school with. I'm a maths teacher now, and I know the tyranny of the school never goes away."

MARK COYLE: "The whole band were jointly on the case on that album. Nobody else apart from Tony could have drummed *Definitely Maybe*. He fit like a glove on those sessions and at the gigs. Same with Guigsy. Technically not a great musician, but spiritually he fitted and he was tight. Guigsy couldn't play a lead line, but he was perfect for Noel to add layers of guitars on top. The whole band were beautifully matched, all the stars aligned."

PUSH & PULL

Once the band had properly settled in and were comfortable at Sawmills, the sessions began to progress quickly – well, at least for most of the band…

"THE KID BROTHER JUST WANTED TO BASH IT ALL DOWN SO HE COULD GET ON WITH BEING A ROCK STAR" **ANJALI DUTT**

ANJALI DUTT: "The minute you assembled the band, there'd be one missing. When they were finally in the same room, it was, 'My God! They're there. Go! Go!' You'd have a flurry of activity for an hour and then off they'd go, back on the PlayStation. The only thing you could do to annoy Liam was make it go on for too long, do something fussy. Recording him was so straightforward. I don't even think Liam knows what being out-of-tune is. His voice is clear, it's strong, he doesn't pop the microphone pop shield, he doesn't sing with sibilant Ss. Liam just sings perfectly."

MARK COYLE: "Liam was so, so good. A couple of tracks just weren't touched, which gives *Definitely Maybe* a certain purity. *Married With Children* was just me and Noel in my studio at home. Noel came round, had a cup of tea, we set up the studio really quickly and Liam was only in the house for about six minutes. Came in, sang, fucked off, done. One take and it was beautiful."

ANJALI DUTT: "Oasis were a great mixture of Noel wanting them to sound like his entire record collection and his kid brother's band just about being able to play garage rock. Noel saying, 'I want it to sound like Neil Young' wasn't going to happen, as his kid brother's band were not Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. They were pulling in two different directions. Mark and Noel are serious music anoraks. They'd listen to tons of music on headphones, with Noel adding layers and layers and layers of guitars. And the kid brother just wanted to bash it all down so he could get on with being a rock star. It must have been strange for Noel. He could get to be massive, but to do it he had to deal with his kid brother's mates. Unfortunately for him, this was the way to make it big."

MARK COYLE: "The hardest song to do was *Bring It On Down*, because Tony couldn't get his rhythm together. He'd been playing it live for years, but the more he tried, the worse it got. In a way, it was entertaining seeing him crumble. We left Sawmills lacking the drum track. Once we started mixing in London, we got another drummer in, right in front of Tony. I can't remember who…"

ANJALI DUTT: "I thought the other drummer was someone to do with Paul Weller, one of the White brothers, either Alan, who joined Oasis after Tony, or Steve, who played with Weller."

STEVE WHITE: "I can categorically say it wasn't me, and it's highly unlikely it was Alan. To the best of my memory, the first time our paths crossed properly was when Paul and Noel did *Talk Tonight* on *The White Room* on Channel 4. At that point, *Definitely Maybe* was already out and Alan was playing with Dr Robert. Tony is a great guy who's become a good friend. I was glad to let him know later that Alan was never lined

A full throttle Liam performs at the Wetlands Preserve in New York on 29 October 1994

MAYBE NOT

Despite working on a classic like *Definitely Maybe*, neither co-producer Mark Coyle or engineer Anjali Dutt are widely involved in the music industry now.

Dutt took teacher-training just two years later and works as a maths teacher. Her former pupils include Paul Weller and Trevor Horn's children. "I thought at first I'd be a freelance engineer, waiting for the phone to ring," she explains. "But the phone doesn't ring if you don't rustle things up. Now, even if Coldplay rang, I'd have to say no as I'd have to get to school."

Coyle simply hasn't heard a band worth bothering with. He also worked with The Stone Roses and Shack, overseeing the 2015 reissue of Shack singer Michael Head's cult classic *The Magical World Of The Strands*. "I don't hear anything I'd like to be involved in," says Coyle. "I struggle to hold an interest. After Michael Head and Noel Gallagher, where do you go? You're just settling, working for record companies and taking jobs on. I was never a jobbing producer. From the early days, I'd only work for people I liked."

up to replace Tony before Noel got rid of him. That just didn't happen." (As far as *Long Live Vinyl* can ascertain, the drummer was most likely Tony Elson of Oasis' early champions The Real People).

MARK COYLE: "Whoever it was, the other drummer was even worse. Tony had his own style, and trying to sit someone else in to do what he did? No chance. We sacked the other guy off and said to Tony, 'Right, this is your chance'. And he nailed it, first take."

OFF TO THE CHIP SHOP

The Sawmills sessions were completed in under a fortnight. Mixing began at Eden Studios in Chiswick.

ANJALI DUTT: "Sawmills was great for Oasis, because it had no connotations to urban life and it was so complicated to interrupt them. It was really hard to get anything done at Eden. Oasis were party people and all these very nice but very heavy people turned up from Liverpool and Manchester like a rap posse. Liam also had a bad habit of wandering off to the chip shop, making friends and inviting them back to the studio."

ALAN MCGEE: "When Mark and Anjali were mixing the album, it sounded too indie and very thin. It was wrong. With someone as good as Anjali involved and it wasn't working? That's when I started to worry. I thought, 'What are we going to do?' But I had my own drama going on, as I was in rehab. So I wasn't totally consumed with Oasis trying to get their fucking record done."

FALLING MASONRY

Oasis manager Marcus Russell had the solution. He recommended Owen Morris, an engineer who had recently worked with Johnny Marr on Electronic.

ALAN MCGEE: "I was against Owen, saying to Marcus, 'Electronic are a pop band!' Marcus kept on me, saying I should give Owen a mix on spec. So we gave him *Rock & Roll Star* as a trial and it was clear Owen was a genius. As soon as I heard what Owen did, I said, 'Right, he's doing the album'. You only had to listen to Owen's mix once to know he'd nailed it."

MARK COYLE: "Before Owen, the songs weren't quite leaping out of the speakers. He brought the album to life."

ANJALI DUTT: "I prefer the Sawmills mixes, because Owen's aren't sonically varied and it's noticeably louder than anything else. It feels like you've been hit by a load of masonry. I really can't listen to the whole album from beginning to end. But I appreciate the way it sounds is what made it successful. It's just not my personal taste, but Owen got a lot of attitude in and the way he made it sound is what made the album a hit. The songs are anthemic and emotional. You can feel your heart rise and feel a moment when just about any of those songs start up."

GIVE ME GIN & TONIC

With *Definitely Maybe* finished at the third attempt, it was released on 29 August, 1994. It was the fastest-selling debut album of all-time in Britain, shifting 86,000 copies in its first week. *Supersonic* was a classic debut single. *Shakermaker*, *Live Forever* and *Cigarettes And Alcohol* weren't bad either.

ALAN MCGEE: "The singles mostly picked themselves, but I'd wanted *Bring It On Down* as the first single. Me and Noel were in the studio and I was still doing drugs at the time. Noel cut me a big, big line of coke and, when I took it, he put on *Supersonic*. Noel said: 'That should be the single', I said 'YES!' and that's how *Supersonic* came out as the first single."

ANJALI DUTT: "I was excited that an album I'd worked on didn't have that very male indie audience. You'd go anywhere and *Definitely Maybe* would be on: clubs, stadiums, middle-class, lower-class, any colour, anywhere in England."

MARK COYLE: "*Definitely Maybe* never leaves you. It's such a massive record, and quite obviously it's stood the test of time."

ALAN MCGEE: "*What's The Story…* has got some amazing songs on, but it's not a complete record like *Definitely Maybe*. Does it feel like 25 years? In May, I was with Debbie Turner, my friend who brought Oasis to play at King Tut's, at the Malmaison Hotel in Manchester. The guy on the decks started playing *Don't Look Back In Anger*, so we had to scarper. That was a weird moment. I thought, 'If it wasn't for Debbie bringing them to Glasgow and me signing them, no fucker would have heard that song'. And here we were, running away." ●

18+

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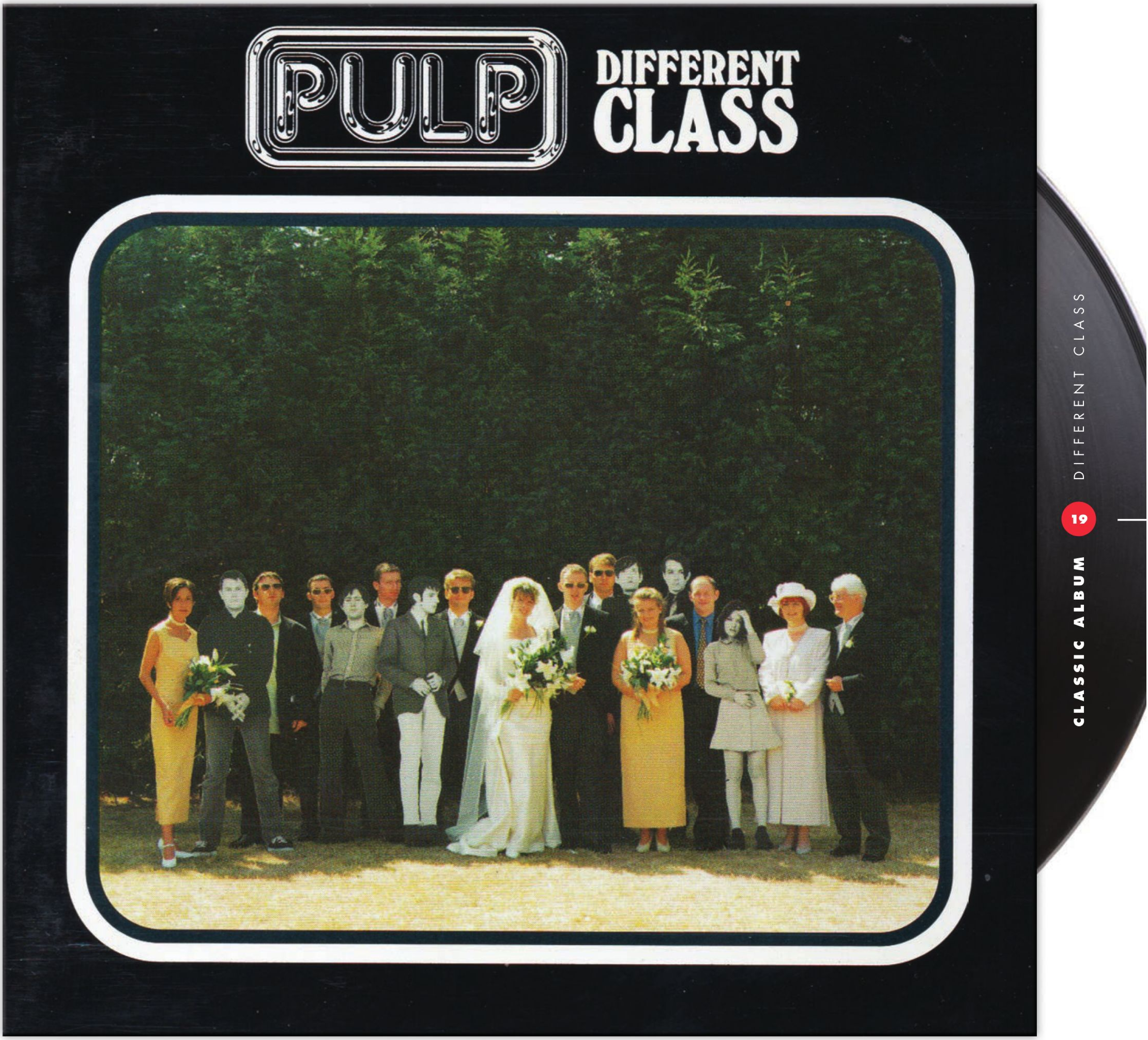
Classic Album
PULP
DIFFERENT CLASS

While their Britpop peers looked to laddism, The Beatles and The Kinks, in 1995 Pulp emerged with an album that was strident, stylish and contemporary – and eclipsed all those around them. **Neil Crossley** dives in...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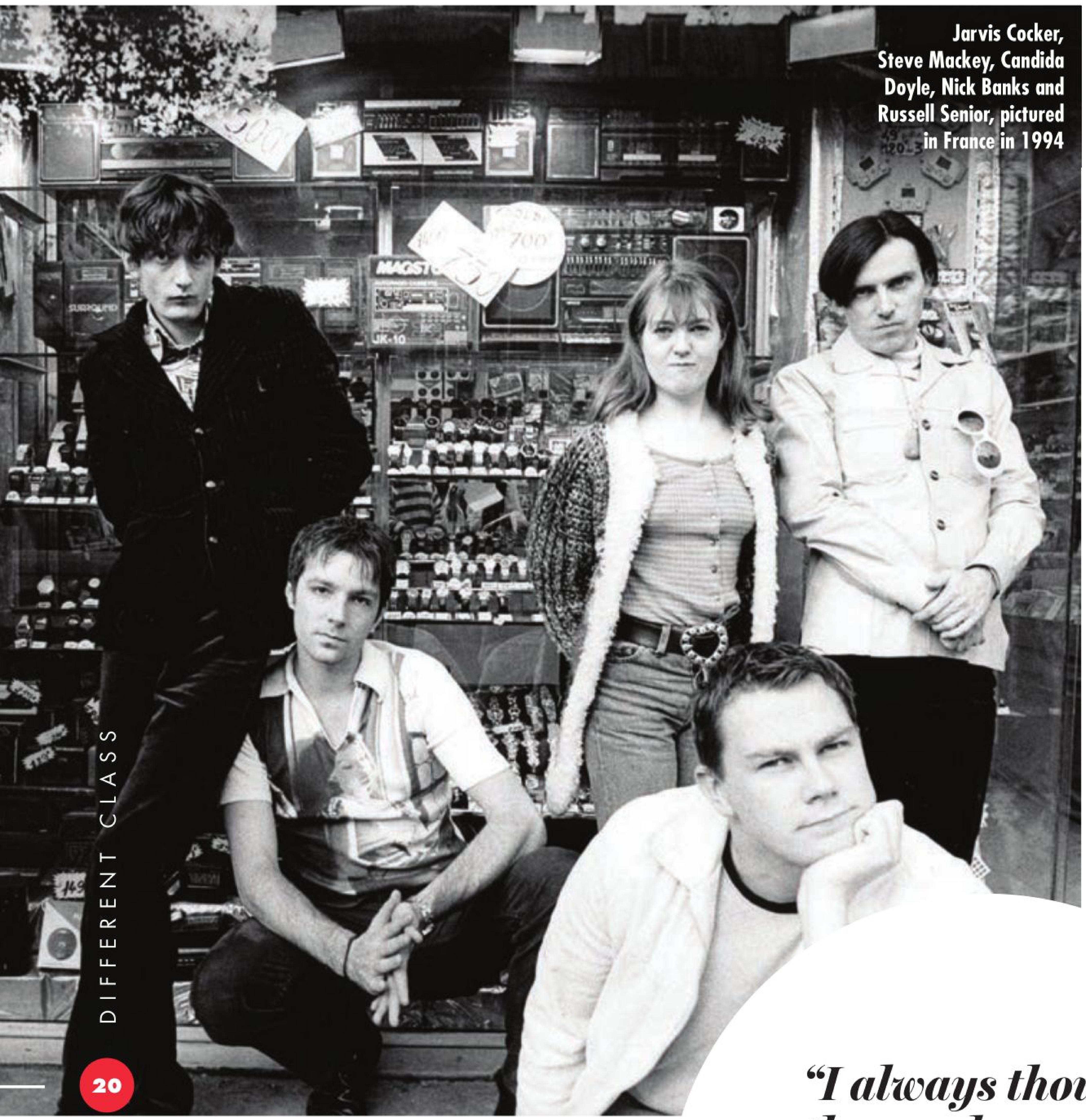


Jarvis Cocker, Steve Mackey, Candida Doyle, Nick Banks and Russell Senior, pictured in France in 1994

Avalon

As retail outlets go, the shop once known as Record & Tape Exchange in Notting Hill has a rich legacy. It was the store where The Clash's Mick Jones could often be spotted; where cash-strapped music journalists would brazenly sell mint promo copies of albums before they'd even been released; and where, in 1994, a skinny Yorkshireman called Jarvis Branson Cocker walked up to the counter with a stack of albums to sell.

Armed with his credit from the sale, Cocker headed straight for the shop's second-hand instrument department, where he bought a Casio MT-500 keyboard. Within an hour, he had written the basic structure of a song that would become the anthem of an era for his band Pulp.

"I went back to my flat and wrote the chord sequence for *Common People*, which isn't such a great achievement because it's only got three chords," he told journalist Nick Hasted in *Uncut* in 2010. "I thought it might come in handy for our next rehearsal." Cocker played his new composition to Pulp bassist Steve Mackey, who laughed when he heard it, adding that it sounded like Emerson, Lake & Palmer's *Fanfare For The Common Man*. This sparked something in Cocker. "I always thought the word 'common' was an interesting thing. It was a real insult in Sheffield to call someone 'common'. That set off memories of this girl that I met at college. She was from a well-to-do background, and there was me explaining that that would never work. Once I got that narrative in my head, it was very easy to write, lyrically." Other band members were as unimpressed as Mackey when Cocker played his new idea. "It sounded like cod-Depeche Mode," recalled violinist and guitarist Russell Senior. But keys player Candida Doyle spotted a classic. "I just thought it was great, straight away. It must have been the simplicity of it. You could just tell it was a really powerful song then."

> ***"I always thought the word common was interesting. It was a real insult in Sheffield to call someone common"***
> JARVIS COCKER

Common People – Cocker's memoir about a wealthy art student who wants to 'slum it' – would catapult Pulp into the pop mainstream and spark an intense burst of songwriting that would result in their fifth album, *Different Class*. In an era when Britpop bands obsessed over the past, *Different Class* shone out as unique, contemporary, stylish and smart.

The album was like a docudrama of 90s Britain – kitchen-sink pop that offered hilarious and heartbreaking accounts of ordinary working-class life – set against an instrumental backdrop that spanned Bowie, Serge Gainsbourg and Stereolab. *Different Class* was Pulp's crowning creative achievement. Over two decades on from its release, its songs, themes and sounds resonate as strongly as ever.

THE LONG GAME

If any band should be commended for sticking it out against all odds, it is Pulp. For 17 years, they ploughed on in relative obscurity, with over 30 members passing through their ranks. It was 1978 when the 15-year-old Jarvis Cocker and his friend Stephen Dalton formed Arabicus Pulp while at The City School in Sheffield. Musically, their style was eclectic, described by one

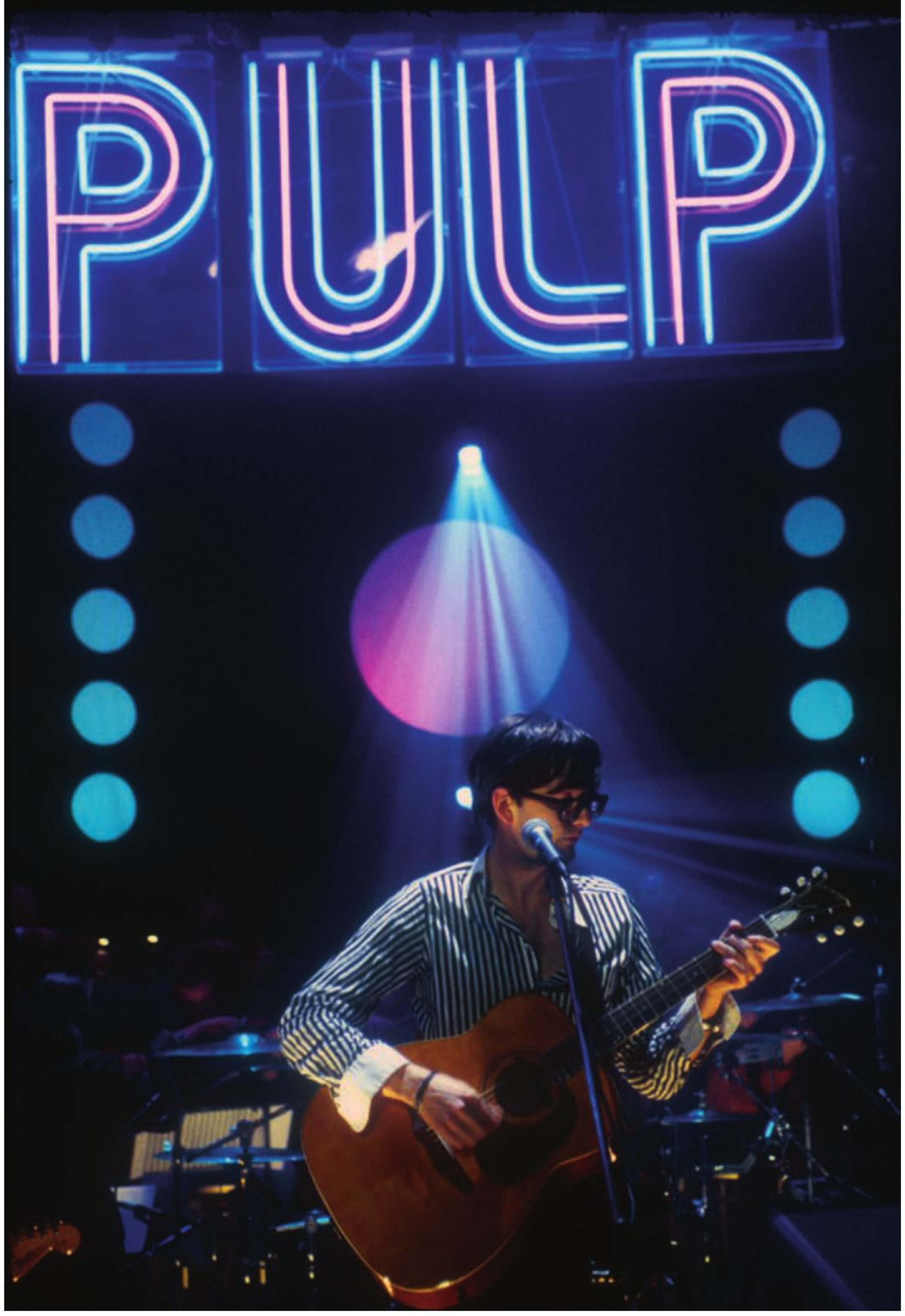
Inside Stepney's Night Club in the video for *Common People*

Guitar's The Star

"A big hit's what I went in there to create," said producer Chris Thomas of *Common People*. "I wasn't really looking for any particular sound at this point – more getting the performance. It's like you start painting, you know? You start filling up a few spaces.

"Right at the end, Jarvis said: 'I want to put a rhythm guitar on'. I said: 'What? There's millions of guitars here'. He went: 'No, I want to put an acoustic on'. And it brought the whole track together. It was just a brilliant idea. That acoustic guitar just welded all these disparate elements together."

Pulp's 1983 debut, *It*, released as a mini album in a limited run of 2,000 copies



Rex

Performing on *Later… With Jools Holland* in November 1995

journalist as "a cross between ABBA and The Fall", and by another, less charitably, "as if they listen to the John Peel Show every night in an endless quest for influences". Fittingly, it was Peel who granted them their first radio session in 1981, after they sent him their demo tape. By then, they were called simply Pulp, and were in the same electronic post-punk ballpark as fellow Sheffield bands The Human League and The Comsat Angels. Recorded in November 1981, their Peel Session could have been the start of great things. But it led nowhere. By 1982, Cocker's entire band had left for university.

LUSH SOUND

Undaunted, Jarvis recruited a new line-up, with his sister Saskia on backing vocals, and pursued a lush folk-based sound. In late 1982, they recorded their debut album *It*, released the following year on Red Rhino Records. Cocker then met a musician who would become his collaborator: Russell Senior (violin, guitar, vocals). Together with keyboard player Candida Doyle, they pursued a new experimental direction. Pulp signed to Fire Records and recorded their second LP, *Freaks*. But by the end of 1986, all the members except Cocker and Senior had left, again. A year later, they recruited new drummer Nick Banks. But in 1988, after failing to gain a following, Cocker folded the band and left Sheffield to study film at Central St Martins College in London.

No sooner had Cocker dissolved Pulp than things actually started to happen. By now, he had met Steve Mackey, a fellow film student who had also moved to London. Mackey introduced Cocker to acid house and raves. Cocker showed

1987's sophomore effort, *Freaks*, was subtitled *Ten Stories About Power, Claustrophobia, Suffocation And Holding Hands*

The songs

Core personnel

Jarvis Cocker Vocals, guitar, keyboards, synths
Russell Senior Guitar, violin
Candida Doyle Keyboards, synths
Steve Mackey Bass guitar
Mark Webber Guitar, keyboards, synths
Nick Banks Drums

Additional personnel

Anne Dudley Orchestral arrangement and conducting (tracks 4, 7, 9)
Gavyn Wright Orchestra leader
Andy Strange Orchestra recording assistance

Main production credits

Townhouse Studios
Producer Chris Thomas
Engineer David 'Chipper' Nicholas
Recorded 1994 to 1995
Released 30 October 1995

1 *MIS-SHAPES*

Revenge can be sweet for a foppish pop star with a serious axe to grind. Here, Cocker sets his sights on the brawling bruisers from his native Sheffield. When the *Different Class* tour rolled into that city on 22 October 1995, he delivered the message personally to the audience at the packed City Hall. "I lived 25 years of my life in Sheffield," he informed them, "and if I walked past any of those pubs on a Saturday night... I had to run because, you know the guys, white shirts, 'taches, curly perm, etcetera. The fashions have moved on, but the mentality remains the same, so don't be fooled. This is for all the mis-shapes in the audience." It's a strident opening salvo for the album, a manifesto for the geeks and freaks who can't go into town for fear that "you could end up with a smack in the mouth, just for standing out".

2 *PENCIL SKIRT*

Lust appears to be the driving lyrical theme of this track, whose quirky 60s lounge strains owe much to the likes of Serge Gainsbourg and Jacques Dutronc, from Cocker's whispered delivery to the echo-swamped pizzicato stabs of the strings.

"This is a song about doing things that you know are wrong but doing them anyway, because you get some kind of something out of it," Cocker told the crowd at Reading Festival in 1994, when the band first played the song live.

3 *COMMON PEOPLE*

Common People is the crowning glory of the album, the anthem of its era, which reflected the class divide – and whose core message resonates just as strongly over two decades on. Producer Chris Thomas recalls the biggest challenge was capturing the excitement of the song. "We spent maybe nine days on it," he recalled to *Uncut* magazine in 2010. "It was quite hard work. I was aware that there were some tempo changes in it, so I tried to go for a rough average. And that was insane. Jarvis didn't have time to sing the verses because it was too fast, and at the end, it completely dragged. So we got them to play it the way they would normally, and found out that it moves from about 90bpm, right up to 160. It starts galloping. And that acceleration is absolutely intrinsic to the excitement."

4 *I SPY*

An orchestral arrangement by Anne Dudley intros this dark, paranoid vignette, which is one of Cocker's finest songwriting achievements. There are no witty, hapless sexual fumblings here – this is the brooding, sneering voyeuristic underbelly of Cocker, with loathsome, sniping intent writ large.

Different Class won the 1996 Mercury Music Prize; the band donated their prize money to the War Child charity

Getty

Mackey the merits of Scott Walker and Serge Gainsbourg before resurrecting the band and recruiting Mackey as their new bassist. Their disparate influences would forge a whole new signature sound.

In 1989, Fire Records offered the band a decent budget to record their third album, *Separations*. When they released a single from the album called *My Legendary Girlfriend* in 1991, *NME* nominated it as their Single Of The Week. This was the turning point for Pulp. In 1992, they left Fire Records for Gift, and began releasing a series of singles that reinforced the success of *My Legendary Girlfriend*. The one that really started to attract attention was *Babies*.

This witty, hook-laden account of teenage hormonal turmoil led to a contract with Island Records. The song would appear on their first major-label album, *His 'N' Hers*, released in spring 1994. The album was an unexpected success, reaching No. 9 in the UK Album Chart and resulting in a Mercury Music Prize nomination. It also produced *Do You Remember The First Time?*, the first Pulp single to enter the Top 40 in the UK Singles Chart.

TV PERSONALITY

Pulp's ascent was fuelled by a wholly unexpected factor: Jarvis Cocker's growing success as a TV celebrity. As the band took off, his natural wit made him a popular guest on panel shows such as *Pop Quiz*. "I think everyone thought that Pulp would be like Denim… some 70s retro outfit who were really entertaining, quite kitsch, but would probably never ever sell a record," recalled BBC Radio 6 Music DJ Steve Lamacq in the BBC Three documentary *The Story Of Common People*. "But the one thing they had was Jarvis Cocker, who set them apart from everyone else."

With a Top 10 album, Pulp's priority was creating a follow-up. They had one song ready to go: Jarvis' Casio-penned composition *Common People*, the first song written for *Different Class*. The challenge was capturing its potential on record. "I realised we'd written something that had pretensions to being anthemic," said Cocker. "A class anthem." The singer's aim was to find a producer for the next album

> ***Cocker's aim for the next album was to find a producer "who would give us a big sound, but not make us sound like twats"***

"who would give us a big sound, but not make us sound like twats". They settled on Chris Thomas, whose credits included Paul McCartney, Roxy Music and, perhaps most intriguingly for Pulp, the Sex Pistols.

The recording of *Different Class* began in late 1994 at Townhouse Studios in Shepherd's Bush. The band were given two weeks to create *Common People* and crammed all 48 recording tracks with an array of instruments. "We used crappy keyboards and Chris did his best to make them sound as good as he could," said bassist Steve Mackey. "We were just very focused on what we could do with what we'd got."

Pulp's third album, *Separations*, was recorded in 1989 but not released until 1992

Write What You Know

Jarvis Cocker is a firm believer in the power and authenticity of autobiographical songwriting. "I would subscribe to Leonard Cohen's view: 'Art is just the ash left if your life is burning well'," he told *The Guardian* in October 2011. "Life is the important bit and detail is key – only a true eyewitness would notice apparently insignificant minutiae. When you put such details into songs, they bestow authenticity. For various reasons, my songs have always been based on narrative. Sometimes, I'd love to be able to get away with being allusive and vague, but any time I've tried, it's been a disaster."

SOUND OF THE SUMMER

Common People was released on 22 May 1995 and hit No. 2 in the UK Singles Chart. It was an instant classic, the sound of the summer, a rousing, breakneck *tour de force* on which Cocker addressed the class war head on: the sobering inequity of those who "dance and drink and screw/ Because there's nothing else to do".

"That song released him," recalls Thomas. "Suddenly, while *Common People* was in the charts, Jarvis blitzed eight songs in 48 hours for *Different Class*. Every one was a winner." Cocker plundered his life for rich inspiration. Schoolday memories were revived through the glitz of *Disco 2000*; *Sorted For E's And Wizz* chronicled the downside of rave culture; while *I Spy* was a dark, paranoid, voyeuristic vignette.

As the band continued work on the album through the summer of 1995, an event occurred that would catapult them into superstar status and set the stage for the release of *Different Class*. When guitarist John Squire of The Stone Roses broke his collarbone while mountain biking, his band pulled out of the headline slot on Glastonbury Festival's Pyramid Stage. Pulp were asked if they could do it and jumped at the chance – Cocker and the band turning in a show so commanding it became a benchmark for what defines a winning performance on the Pyramid Stage.

"I couldn't tell how good the concert was until right at the end when we were playing *Common People*," Candida Doyle

The band had been in existence for 16 years by the time of their fourth album, 1994's *His 'N' Hers*

Pulp headlined the Pyramid Stage at Glastonbury 1995, as last-minute replacements for The Stone Roses

Getty

The songs *continued*

"I can't help it, I was dragged up. My favourite parks are car parks, grass is something you smoke, birds are something you shag. Take your *Year In Provence* and shove it up your ass."

Musically, it harks back to 60s soundtracks, drawing on sweeping thriller theme tunes and the scores of Spaghetti Westerns. Shut your eyes in the verses and the vocal melody has more than a passing nod to ABBA's *The Day Before You Came*. Nick Banks' drumming and Steve Mackey's bass drive this 4/4 track forward, with Mark Webber's deft guitar adding rhythmic power.

5 *DISCO 2000*

"The only bit that isn't true is the woodchip wallpaper," said Jarvis Cocker of the lyrics to this glitzy, evocative account of schooldays infatuation. The subject of the song was Deborah Bone, Cocker's childhood friend who went on to be awarded an MBE for her pioneering work in mental health, but who sadly died in 2015. The opening riff of the song – which reached No. 7 in the UK Singles Chart – was influenced by the intro of Italian singer Umberto Tozzi's 1979 hit, *Gloria*. Due to its millennium theme, Pulp removed the song's synchronisation licence, restricting it from being used for TV and radio throughout 1999 and 2000.

6 *LIVE BED SHOW*

While class is a predominant theme of the album, at least half the material features the love-and-lust preoccupations of the band's previous album, *His 'N' Hers*. Such is the case with *Live Bed Show*, a track that imagines the melancholic emptiness of a bed that no longer sees sexual activity. It's both seedy and emotive, with Cocker's slightly shaky take on a Scott Walker baritone lending real poignancy to the track, as he unveils another vignette of ordinary life. 60s Euro-lounge influences pervade throughout.

7 *SOMETHING CHANGED*

The glorious potential of chance encounters is championed here, in a track showcasing Pulp's talent for impeccable pop structures. From the sparsely strummed open chords and Jarvis' intimate delivery of the opening lines, there's a warm spaciousness to the production as he declares: "I wrote this song two hours before we met/ I didn't know your name or what you looked like yet". In 1995, Cocker revealed to *Melody Maker* that the song had been written 12 years earlier and originally sung by his sister, Saskia. "I worked out that it must have been written quite near to me meeting this girl. It's just wondering, really. If I hadn't gone out and met this particular person in this particular nightclub, and formed a relationship with her, how different would my life have been? It's not really about fate, it's more about the randomness of things. Which I like."

8 *SORTED FOR E'S & WIZZ*

Released as a double A-side with *Mis-Shapes* in 1995, this was Pulp's second successive No. 2. In a bid to get the song banned, the *Daily Mirror* claimed – via the headline 'Ban This Sick Stunt' – that it is a pro-drugs song, an accusation promptly refuted by Cocker: "I don't think anyone who listens to *Sorted*… would come away thinking it had a pro-drugs message. If they did, I'd say they'd misinterpreted it."

The songs *continued*

In a 1996 interview with *Q* magazine, he said the song was inspired by taking ecstasy at raves and the subsequent downside, after he was split up from friends at one event. "Suddenly, all the people who'd been going 'nice one' and 'empathy', when you're trying to get a lift home, they're all, 'No mate, sorry mate, no chance'. The 'common people' goes out the window, then."

9 *F.E.E.L.I.N.G.C.A.L.L.E.D.L.O.V.E*

Against Steve Mackey's pounding, offbeat bass, Nick Banks' staggered drums and Candida Doyle's ethereal digital cadences, Cocker's hushed, droll voice enters at 1:18, to describe the interior of a bedroom: "If I close my eyes, I can visualise everything in it/ Right down to the broken handle on the third drawer down of the dressing table." It's a wry yet menacing mood. At 2:50, it picks up, kicking into straight 4/4 rhythm, before breaking down again to the staggered syncopation. "And as I touch your shoulder tonight," intones Cocker, "this room has become the centre of the entire universe."

10 *UNDERWEAR*

Pulp's impeccable pop sensibilities come to the fore yet again with this charming, wonderfully realised track, which, impressively, hurtles straight into the chorus within 20 seconds of starting. According to bassist Steve Mackey, after years in the wilderness, Pulp seized on pop with all their might. Cocker's voice shifts effortlessly between baritone and falsetto as the song's central narrative of suburban heartbreak and lust unfurls.

11 *MONDAY MORNING*

Bristol's Anson Rooms was the venue for the live debut of this track, a shaky rendition according to one account, but one that had a galvanising impact on the audience. The gig, which was broadcast on BBC Radio 1, also marked the debut for Candida Doyle's new Ensoniq ASR-10 keyboard, a significant step up from her previous setup. *Monday Morning* is punctuated by Pulp's trademark stops-and-starts arrangement, and moves from staggered syncopation in the verses to straightahead 4/4 in the chorus. Once again, the track has a strong autobiographical tone. "If I have learnt anything about songwriting," Cocker told *The Guardian* in October 2011, "it is that in order to ring true, a song must be rooted in your own personal experience."

12 *BAR ITALIA*

Inspired by the real-life Bar Italia at 22 Frith Street in Soho, this final song on the album recounts the slow, frazzled comedown following a night out clubbing. In 1995, *Vox* magazine interviewed the band during the recording of *Different Class* and concluded the song was "...about the mixed delights of heading out into the dawn chorus in that ungodly hour before the milkman whistles his merry tune, nursing the after-effects of a good night out on the E or whatever in search of a reviving cappuccino".

The song remained a band and fan favourite and stayed in the live set on and off right up to their successful reunion in the late 2000s.

All In The Name

The inspiration for the album title came to Jarvis Cocker at Smashing, a club night that ran during the early 1990s in Eve's Club on Regent Street, London. One of Cocker's friends liked to use the phrase 'different class' to describe something that was in a class of its own. Cocker liked the double meaning, with its allusions to the British social-class system, which was a predominant theme on the album. This idea was reflected by a message on the back of the record that reads: "We don't want no trouble, we just want the right to be different. That's all."

told writer Nick Hasted in *Uncut* in 2010. "And they put the lights on the audience. You could see for miles, the lights and people dancing and singing… The next day… everything just felt touched by gold."

For many who saw it, it was a landmark moment. As Dorian Lynskey wrote in *The Guardian*, Pulp's performance on the Pyramid Stage represented "the sublime moment when lifelong outsiders realise they are suddenly right at the very centre of things".

GREATER HEIGHTS

In August 1995, two months before the release of *Different Class*, Pulp released the album's second single, the double A-sided *Mis-Shapes* and *Sorted For E's And Wizz*, which became their second No. 2 single. Then, on 30 October 1995, *Different Class* was released, to widespread critical acclaim. The album entered the UK Albums Chart at No. 1, going on to win the 1996 Mercury Music Prize. In 1996, the album was released in the US, where it received equally rave reviews. "A brilliant, eccentric, irresistible pop album," wrote David Fricke in *Rolling Stone*. As Stephen Thomas Erlewine of *AllMusic* put it: "Pulp fashioned a distinctive, stylish sound that made camp into something grand and glamorous, that retained a palpable sense of gritty reality."

In the UK, Pulp were hailed as one of the torchbearers of Britpop, a term Cocker justifiably hated. But many writers who reviewed the album were keen to point out that Pulp left all the other bands standing.

"Arguments about Blur versus Oasis are irrelevant," concluded Bob Stanley in his review of the album in *Mojo*. "Pulp are in a different class." ●

This Is Hardcore* was released three years after *Different Class

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bittersweet HISTORY

20 YEARS AFTER THE RELEASE OF THE 10 MILLION-SELLING URBAN HYMNS, THE VERVE'S NICK MCCABE SHEDS SOME LIGHT ON THE BAND'S TURBULENT STORY AND HIS OWN DEFINING ROLE IN CREATING ONE OF THE GREATEST ALBUMS OF THE 1990S

RICHARD PURDEN

Time has not diminished the impact of Richard Ashcroft swaggering down London's Hoxton Street, inviting confrontations with passers-by, in the promo video for The Verve's *Bittersweet Symphony*. Under a pile of dark, tousled hair, nonchalant eyes and clad in denim and leather, there was a sense of Marlon Brando's Johnny Strabler from *The Wild One* being updated for the 90s.

In the way that rebels do, he inspired confidence in a generation suffering at the comedown of Britpop. The accompanying music was emotive modern blues, delivered by a band of long-time indie strugglers from the north-west of England – a post-industrial working class song for the people which secured The Verve a No.2 hit in the UK singles charts.

It's now 20 years since The Verve achieved phenomenal commercial success with their third studio album, *Urban Hymns*. In 1995, following *A Northern Soul*, the band split and Ashcroft began work on a solo album.

But within two years, the band had reunited (with additional guitarist Simon Tong) and on 29 September 1997 returned with the seminal album *Urban Hymns*.

Producing three Top 10 UK singles, including a No.1 with *The Drugs Don't Work*, the band enjoyed Brit Award success, a Grammy nomination for *Bittersweet Symphony* and worldwide acclaim.

While promoting his latest album, *These People*, Richard Ashcroft suggested that *Urban Hymns* should have been that first solo album he intended to make and these words have grieved The Verve's co-founder and guitarist Nick McCabe. His often improvised, psychedelic playing drew on a range of sonic effects giving The Verve much of its characteristic sound along with the intuitive groove-driven energy between bass player Simon Jones and drummer Pete Salisbury. "It's funny because I know what the record sounded like before I got involved," says McCabe today, "and it needed me. The songs that Richard brought in, he probably wrote hearing me play on them. When he sat there with the acoustic putting those chords together he heard my guitar over it and, as far as I'm concerned, when I did then put my guitar over the record things suddenly made sense. It sounded great. If he had put it out how it was before then it would have been another Richard Ashcroft solo album.

"Whether it would have done as well, I don't know. I think the other important thing is that people bought into the band the way that they bought into Oasis.

"If back in 1993 Noel Gallagher released his first solo record we might be talking about a very different history."

Nick McCabe, guitarist and co-founder of The Verve, helped capture the mood and spirit of the time on 1997's classic album *Urban Hymns*

McCabe added his signature tripped-out guitar effects to the increasingly traditional songcraft of Richard Ashcroft on *Urban Hymns*

As McCabe suggests, there is a significant shared timeline with Oasis dating back to 1993 when the Manchester collective were asked to support Verve, as they were then known, for a string of dates. "We'd have tapes sent to us for potential support bands and most of them got thrown out of the window by Richard as we were driving. There were three tapes that survived and one was the Oasis demo, which we identified as part of what we were doing.

"It was obviously northern and the energy was the same. The first track was *Columbia* and it was the best one on the demo. I watched them soundcheck and even at that stage they were this fully-formed thing. They were true to the music that they represented and their heritage – we wanted to get closer to that. With *A Storm In Heaven*, there's no mistaking that's not the band that Virgin signed."

Oasis introduced Ashcroft to new values which helped change the direction of their songwriting and attitude. "I think they did have a massive influence. A lightbulb went on with Richard realising what people gravitated towards Oasis for. After that, he was bringing in songs like *History*, *On Your Own* and *No Knock On My Door* to the band. We did some stocktaking after watching the Oasis story unfold. I think there was a point when Richard realised we had walked the other path too far, we were avoiding populist things and throwing away what people liked about Oasis.

"If we hadn't split in 1995, I suppose that's what we were shifting towards. By that point we were looking at where we went wrong."

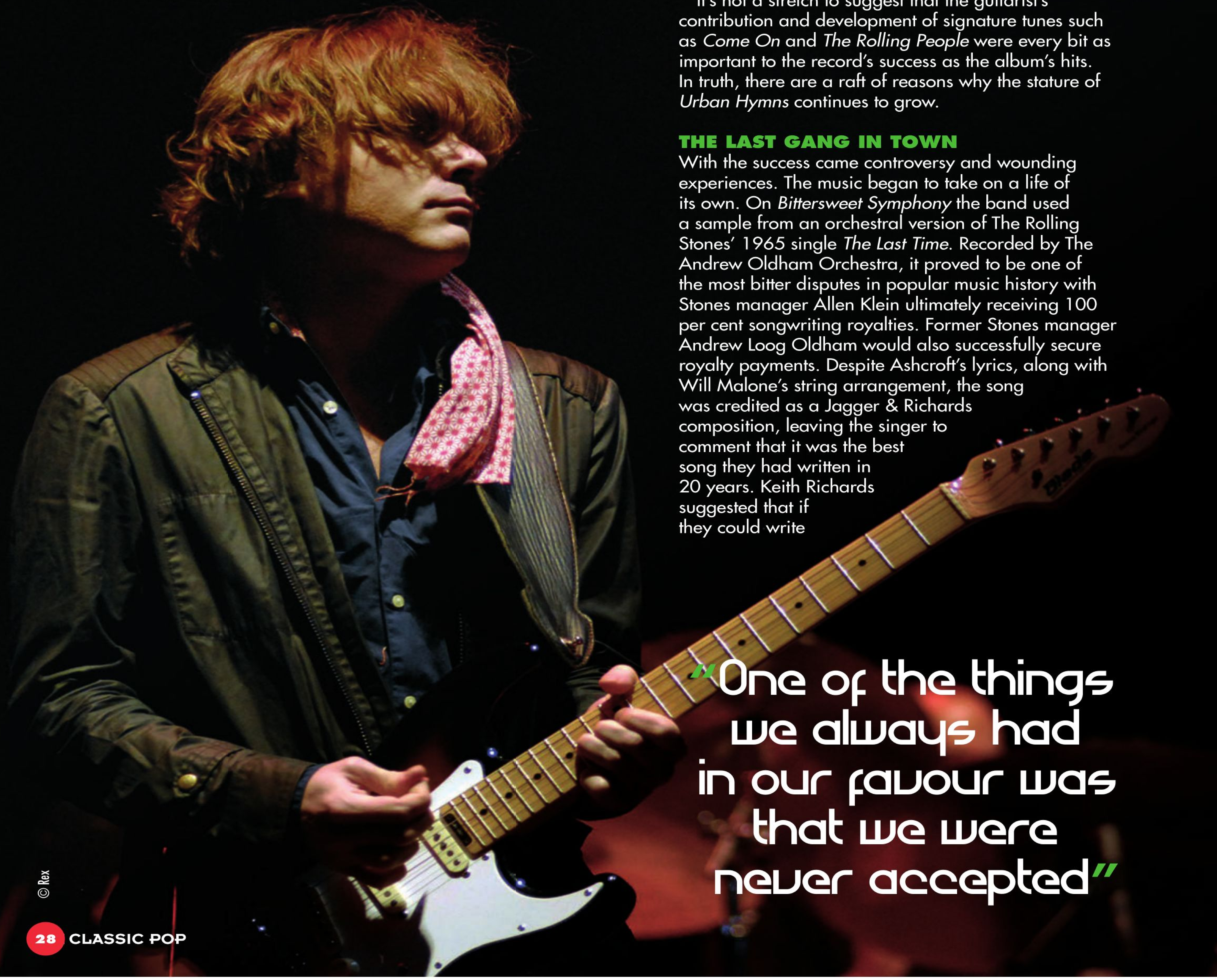
While *Urban Hymns* may have started out as a solo album, Ashcroft soon became aware it was vital that The Verve, with McCabe reinstated, was the answer to why the record was not reaching its full potential. Various members have suggested a spiritual dimension graced the recording sessions when the original line-up eventually regrouped with the addition of Simon Tong on rhythm guitar and keyboards.

The peace wasn't to last and disputes about the album remain to this day. "When I read stuff like that [Ashcroft claiming *Urban Hymns* should have been a solo album] I think 'why are you still so angry, why are you trying to steal credit from me for guitar parts that I recorded 20 years ago? Can't you allow me my kudos as well?"

It's not a stretch to suggest that the guitarist's contribution and development of signature tunes such as *Come On* and *The Rolling People* were every bit as important to the record's success as the album's hits. In truth, there are a raft of reasons why the stature of *Urban Hymns* continues to grow.

THE LAST GANG IN TOWN

With the success came controversy and wounding experiences. The music began to take on a life of its own. On *Bittersweet Symphony* the band used a sample from an orchestral version of The Rolling Stones' 1965 single *The Last Time*. Recorded by The Andrew Oldham Orchestra, it proved to be one of the most bitter disputes in popular music history with Stones manager Allen Klein ultimately receiving 100 per cent songwriting royalties. Former Stones manager Andrew Loog Oldham would also successfully secure royalty payments. Despite Ashcroft's lyrics, along with Will Malone's string arrangement, the song was credited as a Jagger & Richards composition, leaving the singer to comment that it was the best song they had written in 20 years. Keith Richards suggested that if they could write



"One of the things we always had in our favour was that we were never accepted"

© Rex

The Verve MkII, featuring Simon Jones, Pete Salisbury, Richard Ashcroft, Nick McCabe and Simon Tong, were named the Best British Group at 1998's Brit Awards

a better one then they could have the money – he was perhaps unaware of their follow-up, *The Drugs Don't Work*, which gave the band their first No.1.

Days before the release of *Urban Hymns*, The Verve would once again play alongside Oasis. The Manchester five-piece had delivered two unit-shifting classic rock'n'roll albums and brought their last gang in town mentality back into the charts. Their third album, *Be Here Now*, failed to live up to the monumental hype and it seemed as if the baton had been passed on. Supporting Oasis at Earls Court in London, The Verve walked on stage 10 minutes early to play a longer set. Richard Ashcroft rightly proclaimed that they were going to take the roof off.

"I remember that gig really well," says McCabe. "There was a lot of criticism of Oasis at the time and I wondered what people were down about because the single, *D'You Know What I Mean?*, was good. We knew we had made a great record and we could back it up, we were gearing up around it. Oasis didn't have the mission anymore, they had become accepted and digested and established their style. I suppose the game was up because there was nothing else to play for, they had proven themselves.

"One of the things we always had in our favour was that we were never accepted. That gave us the impetus to be bloody minded and turn our backs several times on the career if you can call it that. That was palpable with us, there was a resistance and a sense of combat that cut both ways. It could alienate some people but if you wanted to get on board it was worth the price of the ticket."

northern souls

A MEETING OF MINDS

It was in 1990 at Winstanley Sixth Form College where Richard Ashcroft and Nick McCabe formed an immediate chemistry. Each recognised something in the other that would lead them to join forces. "When I encountered Richard, he was the most striking personality out of that set of people. I'd already started to get my music thing together and had to oust one member to get this new star in – even though he had never been in a band before. It was apparent that this guy was going to function really well with what we were doing. There was a pull and an attraction that got lost along the way, but there was a very strong bond in those early days". The cooling towers visible from McCabe's bedroom window in Haydock, St Helens, were a constant reminder of its industrial past. Growing up in Wigan, Lancashire, at age 11 Ashcroft lost his father who had suffered a brain haemorrhage while McCabe had a brother in prison. "I think there was an identification between us that we weren't like other kids who had slightly more comfortable backgrounds. Obviously Richard had a few issues, he was sofa surfing at the time and I think that had an impact on his sense of place in things. My dad was a bus driver, my brother had been in and out of the nick, people around us had a sense of confidence and entitlement that I couldn't really relate to so I brought the chip on my shoulder into this new environment. That's what we had in common back then."

this could be the last time

A BAND ON THE BRINK

A decade after *Urban Hymns*, The Verve re-emerged with *The Thaw Sessions*, a download which proved the band had lost none of their vitality. A string of transcendent live dates at the end of 2007 and a No.4 hit in the UK singles charts the following summer with *Love Is Noise* took the band back into the mainstream. The song preceded a new album *Forth* and for McCabe the record was "a hybrid of everything. By that time there was no objectivity in steering it and you can't say that about the previous records which were deliberate attempts to capture one side of us. By *Forth* you have a map, it's a good record to start with. The chaos has a handle which you can manipulate and do interesting things with. *Urban Hymns* was exploring Richard's enthusiasm for universal songs, there was a clarity of writing that we hadn't considered before. *A Northern Soul* was about stripping things to its fundamentals and getting back to the purity of what we do, it was an attempt to step outside of history and make something timeless – we were aware of the legacy even back then. *A Storm In Heaven* is almost like a film-maker's record; it's the album that a young man dreams of making. *Forth* is who we actually were all along." Touring continued throughout the summer of 2008 but significantly, during the band's press campaign, Richard Ashcroft said next to nothing. After a third split he suggested that The Verve had "did what we set out to do."

© Avalon/Photoshot

"I can see what we achieved as young men and I appreciate the spirit it was done in"

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

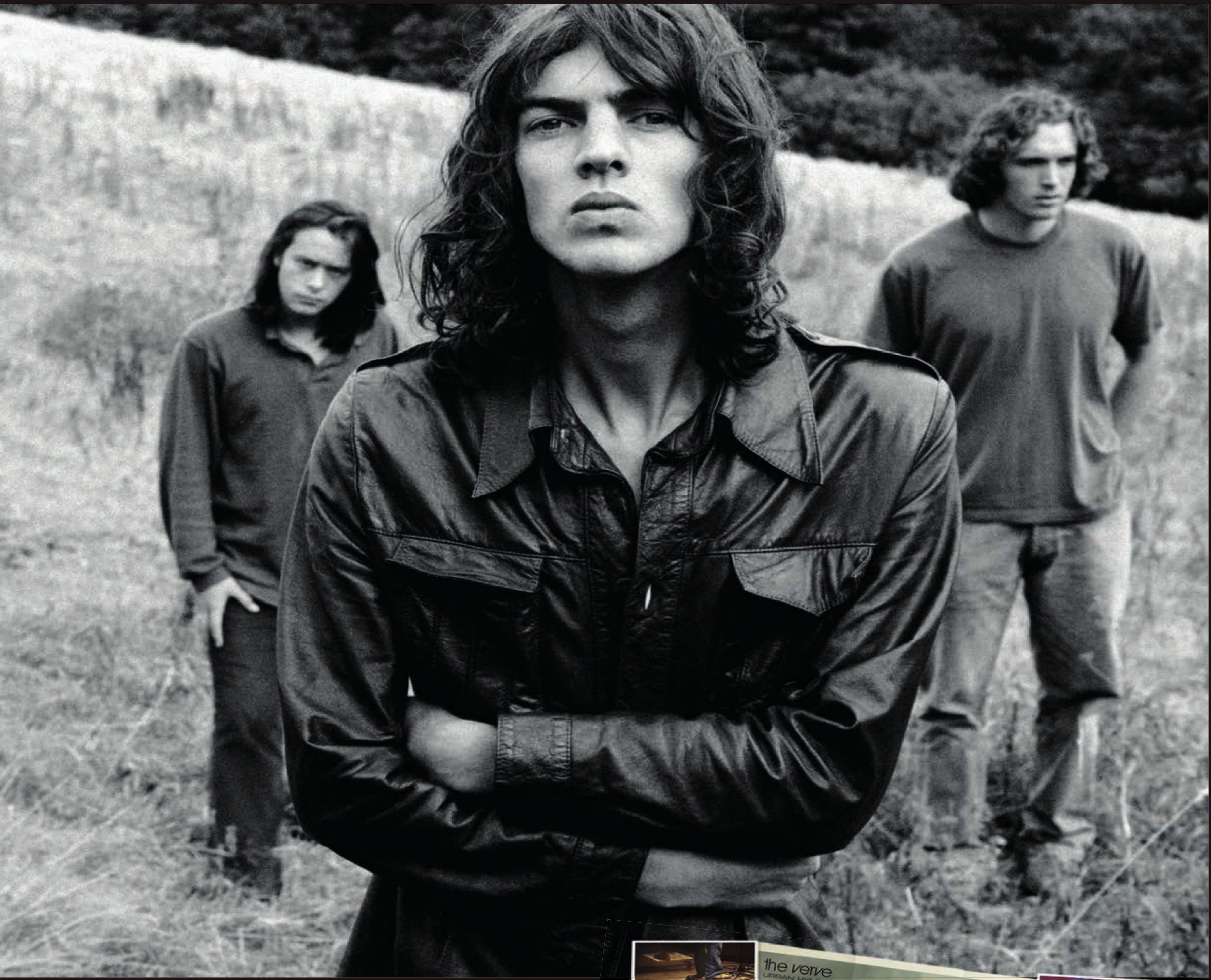
Urban Hymns achieved the five million sales mark in a matter of months and would eventually surpass 10 million copies around the globe. Ashcroft appeared on American newsstands as the featured cover star of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The eye-catching headline blazed 'The Verve and the return of rock'n'roll'. Just after the band's legendary appearance at Wigan's Haigh Hall, another cover story, this time in the *NME*, ran with 'McCabe quits… Again! Is this the end for The Verve?' The guitarist suggests it was another false explanation of what really happened. "I never left, but I've been sacked a few times in favour of a project that is ongoing (Ashcroft's solo career), which feeds into why some of us appreciate an investment that can't be ignored and others can't see that because it's tied in with another perspective."

The band's hedonistic lifestyle, particularly when recording *A Northern Soul*, and varying health problems have been well-documented. Today, McCabe is a devoted family man with a settled outlook but there remains unresolved issues with Ashcroft. "I can function better than I did between 1991 and 1994," he says. "The cost in The Verve has been quite high for me. I'm the one who has had the most personal cost out of this band." A case in point is the aftermath of their Haigh Hall live show when McCabe was ordered to make an impossible decision: "I had glandular fever and was self-medicating as I had not been diagnosed and was in a bit of a state. I went to see a doctor on the advice of the manager, Jazz [Summers] who is no longer with us. His doctor said 'you are not going on tour'. I suggested delaying the dates as I wanted to get better. I was offered an ultimatum: either do the gigs or I was out of the band. I didn't expect that gambit, perhaps it was the threat of insurance but they went ahead and did those gigs which was the American tour essentially… Pete and the two Simons were told minutes before going on stage that Richard had signed a solo deal with Virgin."

The saving grace, looking back at the Haigh Hall gig, is that it was a defining moment for the small towns in the north-west – that was their Spike Island.

Above **The Verve recorded two studio albums before *Urban Hymns*, the blissed-out *A Storm in Heaven* (1993) and the rockier *A Northern Soul* two years later**

Right **The Verve celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Urban Hymns* with a deluxe 2CD set, a super deluxe 5CD with DVD package, and a 3LP vinyl boxset**



The band would return for festival dates, but the writing was on the wall: The Verve without their idiosyncratic and definitive guitarist was unworkable. "It's easy to be resentful of things that went right or left" explains McCabe. "We're not writing cinema, this is real life and these are actual events. Fighting over a record that is 20 years old is bizarre. It's weird knowing who Richard was when we made *Urban Hymns*. There was a unity by the time we got back together and a climate of... not forgiveness, but acceptance and moving forward. He managed to derail that again.

"There was a generosity of spirit around the record that makes the hostility now seem sad and makes me think: 'what happened mate?' It's surprisingly pleasant how well the stuff stands up. I've made my peace with it. From this vantage point I can see what we achieved as young men and I appreciate the spirit it was done in."

● The Verve's 20th anniversary edition of *Urban Hymns* is out now.

SOUL REBEL

With fifth solo album *Natural Rebel* out now and a UK tour underway, Richard Ashcroft's star is once again in the ascendant. **John Earls** meets him in the studio for a personal rendition…

Long before *Long Live Vinyl* turns the dictaphone on to formally speak to Richard Ashcroft, he's already offered more entertainment than most singers' full interviews. We meet at State Of The Ark Studios in Richmond, where Ashcroft has recorded since The Verve. He's chosen the venue so he can play two of excellent new album *Natural Rebel*'s songs at full volume on the studio speakers: unabashed love song *That's How Strong* and the album's swaggering closer, *Money Money*.

Although he merely mouths the words to *That's How Strong* while sat next to *LLV* at the huge mixing desk, by the time the riff from *Money Money* kicks in, Ashcroft is on his feet, pacing around the console and giving the familiar 'Come on!' outstretched-arms gesture as he yells the song's words to the studio wall. He looks every bit as happy as he does facing an arena audience. Not only is your startled reporter here, but so is Ashcroft's producer Jon Kelly, his publicist Katie… and his friendly wife Kate, the subject of *That's How Strong*.

Just as Katie and Kate discuss where our interview should take place, Ashcroft strides off down a side room, grabs a pair of swivel-stools; and that's when the fun begins. You don't so much interview Richard Ashcroft as play pinball, hoping any words you manage to get in will lead him down a route that may occasionally resemble the question you asked. Which isn't to say Ashcroft isn't engaged – he's just got more life going on in his head than even someone with his rapid-fire mouth knows what to do with.

Ashcroft's eccentricity is a reputation he's keenly aware of, and playful with. "I started out as Mad Richard," he acknowledges. "I've avoided the traps I could have fallen into and, after a lot of scrapes, I've got to the point where I'm a professional human being now. I'm thankful for what I've got, and for what my fans want to hear. I still want a good time and to have a laugh, but I can't be out of my mind taking drugs. People always want the northern soul to be luxury scum. If you want, I can be luxury scum. But, really, do you think I'm going to be daft enough in this visual age to look like a trawlerman from some indie band standing in a field of rapeseed oil?"

FUTURE'S BRIGHT

Indeed, having shaved his head for his previous album *These People* two years ago, Ashcroft is back to looking the luxuriously haired, whippet-thin Proper Rock Star he's essentially been since Verve debut *A Storm In Heaven* 25 years ago. Do his supersize sunglasses stay on for our interview? Of course. Ashcroft's medical certificate probably states: "Colour of eyes: mirrored."

A recurring theme in his discourse is that it's time to "draw a line in the sand" between quality music and everything else. That isn't to say Ashcroft is a 'real music = guitars' traditionalist. He speaks as approvingly of Drake as Catfish And The Bottlemen. For Ashcroft, it's all about intent.

"I want to take people back up a level," he asserts. "There was a time when people woke up to what was happening and went 'Yes! Fuck that fake shit. We want these musicians' ▶

Dean Chalkney

Dean Chalkney

energy: they're us, and we're them.' You're either an end-of-the-pier entertainer on steroids, or you're making a living from your own creation."

Ashcroft has previously stated his antipathy towards *The X Factor*, but is more amenable now, saying: "I saw the show at the weekend, and I actually thought, 'Bless everyone on it'. As an entertainment show, carry on – make your money and enjoy it. But don't come onto musicians' turf, because you've got a six-month prime-time TV advert every year. The mainstream needs to start accepting that the ones who come from a different path to get their songs must have some kind of vehicle within that mainstream. There's two parallel cultures now. But we can come together, without dividing us."

As part of that unifying vision, *Natural Rebel* shuns political lyrics in favour of songs of love and hope. It's a message Ashcroft is fully committed to, explaining: "I'm trying to be more open on this record. I can't save the world, and I don't have a great enough opinion of myself to believe I can guide anyone in any political way. But I can offer a transcendent experience when you see me play live. We can leave the daily world behind, to go to a higher place than that."

What about those who say it's music's role to reflect the world in which it's made? "I get groups of people at my concerts who may have thought they were divided: at the front of a show in Glasgow, it'll be one guy who supports Rangers, another Celtic. Why would I affect that with my opinion? I'm more like Socrates. I haven't worked out the answers, so you tell me, oh all-knowing-one, what we should do. Because my job is to survive this business, keep a family and try to become a better man."

PERSONAL RESURRECTION

It's a theme expressed most directly in *That's How Strong* and its declaration of love for Kate, the ex-Spiritualized keyboardist who married Ashcroft in 1995. "I'm glad to have got that song down forever for me and Kate," he smiles. "I admired John Lennon doing that with *Woman*. It would have been easy for Lennon to have done a punk-sounding record and been regarded as cool. To make *Woman* when punk is happening? He's opening himself up, and that makes him the biggest punk of all. *Woman* is as punk as it gets."

The new album's lead single *Surprised By The Joy* features the line "I'm surprised I'm alive, I guess." But Ashcroft makes it clear he's not referring to his own past misadventures. "It's not about me, but the sense that waking up every day is a personal resurrection, and that's a miracle in itself," he says, his smile filling that narrow face. "Every day, you get a new start."

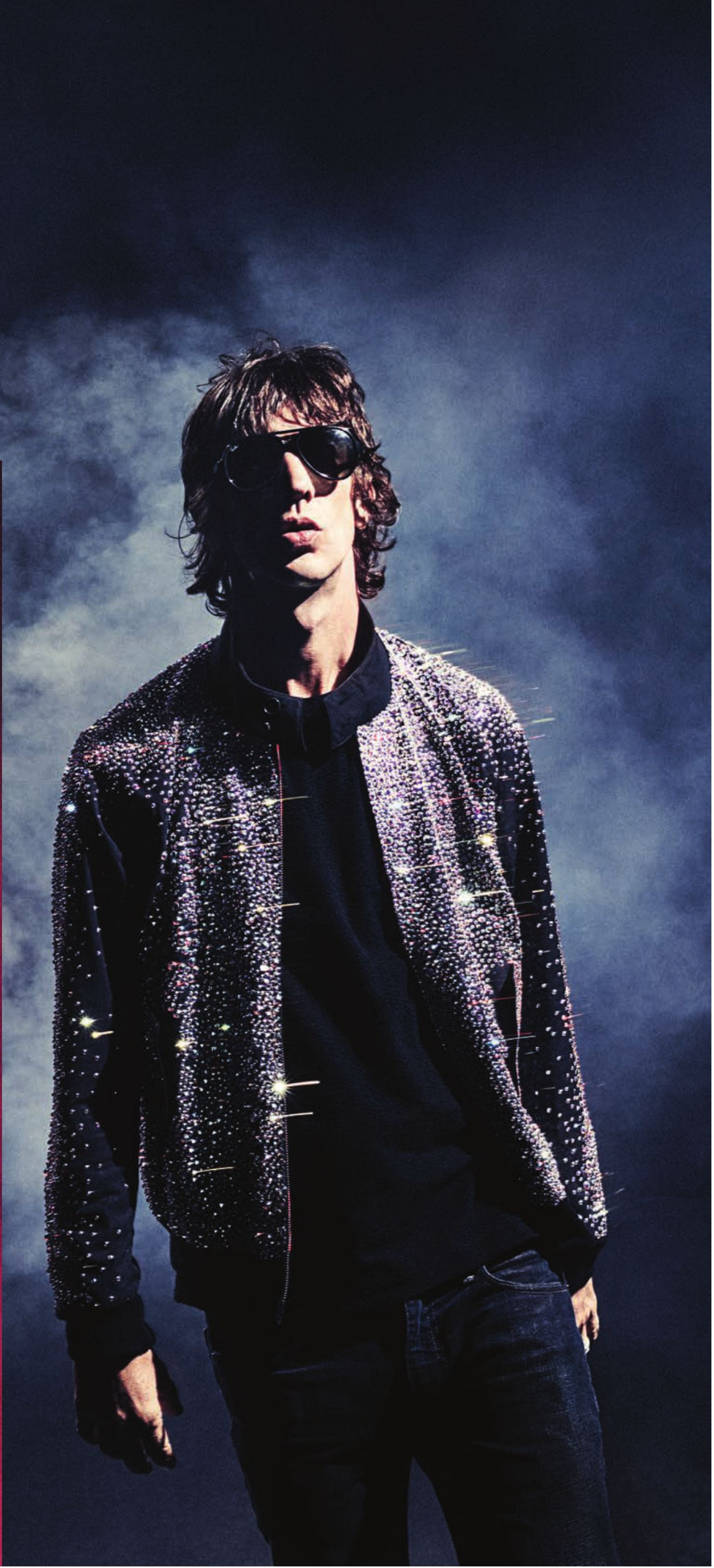
At its best, Ashcroft feels his music contributes joy. "I've written songs that are modern-day folk classics. *The Drugs Don't Work* will be handed down among generations, whether it's vinyl, digitised or all of that finishes. People will still go: 'Do you remember that song that went, 'All this talk of getting old…'? I was 26 when I wrote that, and me and my audience have been through a hell of a lot since. And I'm still learning from those songs I wrote years ago, I've not outgrown them – the meaning of some songs I wrote in my 20s is only hitting me now, like a stone."

As an example, he cites *The Drugs Don't Work* and its description of someone past the point of medical care. "I lost my nan

Ashcroft's summer was spent touring with The Rolling Stones, Roger Waters and Liam Gallagher

Dean Chalkney

"MY JOB IS TO SURVIVE THIS BUSINESS, KEEP A FAMILY AND TRY TO BECOME A BETTER MAN"



Dean Chalkney

BITTER SWEET TASTE LINGERS

In June, Richard Ashcroft supported The Rolling Stones at their Manchester and Edinburgh stadium shows. That's despite the Stones' old label ABKCO getting 100% of the publishing royalties from The Verve's *Bitter Sweet Symphony* – because of its sample of The Andrew Oldham Orchestra's version of *The Last Time*.

Did Ashcroft ask Mick Jagger for his royalties back? "No!" laughs Ashcroft who, 21 years on from the single reaching No. 2, is sanguine about the case. "Mick would have to ask ABKCO for me to get me our royalties back, as they own all the Stones' 60s publishing. When *Bitter Sweet Symphony* first came out, I'd have liked it if a colossus like the Stones could have joined forces with The Verve and go double-barrelled after Allen Klein and sort it."

ABKCO owner Klein died in 2009, and Ashcroft says: "Now Klein is dead, in a weird way I enjoy what's happened. Since 1997, the incredible lyrics, that melody, the freshest song of that decade… that company over there in America takes every single penny from it? That is wild. I couldn't go to my morning yoga session and eat my steel-cut oats with that on my mind."

Ashcroft believes ABKCO may yet pay The Verve their due, saying: "If I was at ABKCO, I'd be saying: 'Listen, this ain't good for our brand. Maybe we need to sort something out with Ashcroft, because we can't find anyone else who claims to have written those lyrics.' But you have to be real and say: 'I'm not working down a hole in the rain, I'm doing alright.' Straight after, *The Drugs Don't Work* got to No. 1. So suck it, ABKCO."

Fifth solo album ***Natural Rebel*** **is available in a variety of limited, signed vinyl formats**

and my auntie recently, and this is the first time either of them won't witness an album of mine. Playing *The Drugs Don't Work* now, it's…" Ashcroft tries to sigh with regret, but begins to cry. Taking a gulp of water and, yes, removing his sunglasses to wipe his eyes, he soon recovers his composure. Our interview had been delayed while Ashcroft arranged his grandmother's funeral, and he ruefully smiles, saying: "Sorry, man, it's a bit raw."

EMOTIONAL RESCUE

There's no need for Ashcroft to apologise – as he points out, gigs like his are one of the few places it's socially acceptable for men to cry. He doesn't like to over-complicate the emotional heft he wants that music to have, explaining: "I don't know much, and I know that, in a sense, I'm limited. That's not on purpose, but I know that there's so much more to explore with the music I make. So why would I try to play a jazz chord in the middle of a song, just to show that I can?" He admits new song *Birds Fly* shares its chord structure with Dion's *Runaround Sue*, laughing: "I could have said to the musicians: 'Can you squeeze something in there, so it's not like all those other songs?' But I want that essence underneath my melody, as I love '50s rock 'n' roll when it was just about the song, not obsessively analysing everything."

One area where Ashcroft feels technology brings benefits is the ability to release music instantly. He approves of artists such as Kanye West and Drake constantly releasing new music, and hopes to follow suit. "I can go: 'Right, it's February, *Natural Rebel* is still out there, how about these eight tunes which maybe have a completely different spin?' I'm excited by that freedom." Before *These People*, it was six years since Ashcroft had released new music. "I've had a lot of clogged years, a lot of pain and a lot of wasted time," he concludes. "I've reflected on that as I've got older. I can either go down with all that waste, or I can get on with the time I've got left. I was known as 'Columbo' in The Verve. And now it's time to make haste – this is Columbo Rides Again." ●

> "I LOVE '50S ROCK 'N' ROLL WHEN IT WAS JUST ABOUT THE SONG, NOT OBSESSIVELY ANALYSING EVERYTHING"

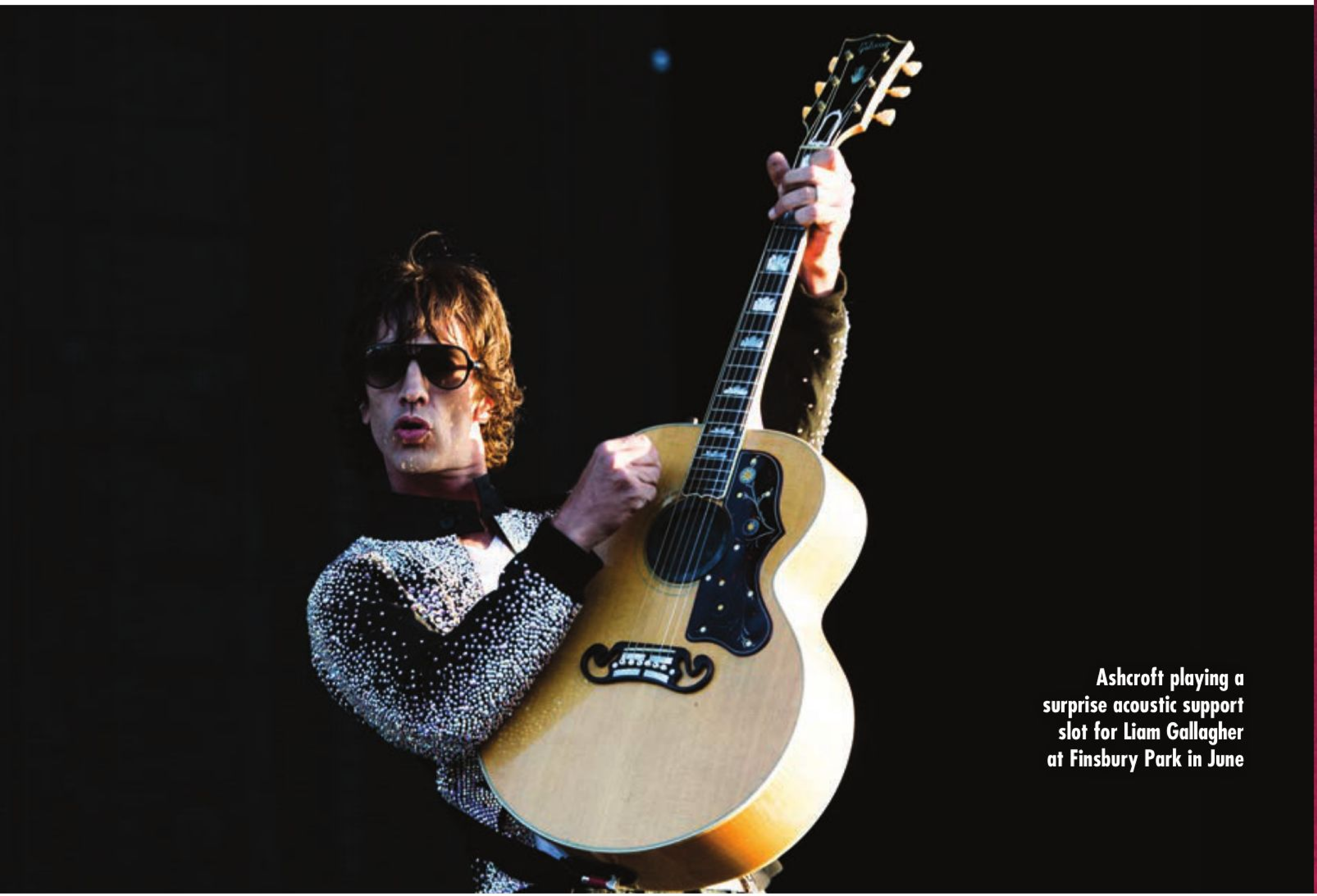
THE SOUND OF SILENCE

After a summer playing shows with The Rolling Stones, Roger Waters and Liam Gallagher, Richard Ashcroft is on a mission to return live music to sounding natural for the musicians on stage, rather than having pristine quality from the mixing desk going to in-ear monitors which remove any extraneous crowd noises.

"I'd love singers to go back to using monitors in concerts," Ashcroft pleads. "The power you have on stage should be the power you had in your practice room, and you don't put earbuds in then. A band on stage, bobbing along with everyone having their own personal mixes in their ears, there's something very odd about that."

Ashcroft's guitarist Steve Wyreman has worked with Rihanna, J Cole and Nas. "Steve told me about 'dead stages', where there are 15,000 fans going crazy in the arena, but there's no sound on the stage at all, because it's all coming from the mixing desk. What problem was there that needed fixing like this? I was lucky to come through when we had the best monitors in the world to check how you sounded – and just as they got it right, nobody wants them."

For Ashcroft, the best onstage sound was when The Verve supported Oasis on their first arena tours, with veteran engineer Mark Coyle handling the live sound. "Coyley had it so loud," Ashcroft enthuses. "I'd never heard a guitar so loud, and I haven't since, either. It was as close as I'll get to seeing The Velvet Underground play live."



Ashcroft playing a surprise acoustic support slot for Liam Gallagher at Finsbury Park in June

Robin Pope

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ISLANDS
IN THE SUN

Ash frontman Tim Wheeler travelled the world when writing new album *Islands*, and his wanderlust produced a vibrant return to form for one of Britpop's best-loved bands. **Gary Walker** meets the Northern Irish singer to find out why the band still care about vinyl as much as ever…

They pressed their first record at the same time as studying for their GCSEs, released a volley of infectious chart-topping 7"s and a million-selling album while in their teens; cut 26 singles in a single year, and provoked Eric Cantona into threatening to "spit on your record". Ash's next move, in 2007, was to announce that *Twilight Of The Innocents* would be their last physically released album as the digital revolution took hold and they split from Warner subsidiary Infectious. Thankfully, the band hadn't banked on the resurgence of interest in vinyl, and this spring unleashed their seventh LP – *Islands*.

Records remain just as close to the Downpatrick, County Down band's hearts as when frontman Tim Wheeler, drummer Rick McMurray and bassist Mark Hamilton formed their Iron Maiden-aping first band Vietnam as 12-year-olds inspired by their fledgling collections of punk and metal albums.

With a catalogue that already included the debut mini-album *Trailer*, coming-of-age Britpop classic *1977*, the darker *Nu-Clear Sounds* and the swoonsome yet underrated *Free All Angels*, the decision to turn their backs on albums was shortlived. 2007 proved to be vinyl's nadir, as sales bottomed out before starting to climb again and Wheeler, who grew up listening to Pixies, Nirvana, Sonic Youth and Mudhoney records, was happy to change his mind.

"I'm delighted about it," he says. "It was a reaction to the streaming and digital iPod world. I think it was definitely a reaction to losing the experience of having a physical product. The physical format makes it easier and you feel more connected to it. I completely understand that, from my early days of collecting vinyl in the early 90s, with all the indie bands I love. It's great to see it make this comeback.

"I've always been a big collector. When I was a teenager it was a big thing, with all the Creation Records stuff, and I was a big Ride and Suede fan, and the Pixies. All those bands who put out great 12"s with a bunch of great B-sides. We kind of missed out on the 12" EP era, we were a real 7" band, but I was a real big fan of 12" EPs."

THREE WHEELER
Tim's all-time-favourite records

Astral Weeks Van Morrison
"I love that album and keep coming back to it, and I love all the Belfast references in that record. I saw him do a special performance of the album in New York a few years ago."

Doolittle Pixies
"There are so many killer songs on this album, and great songwriting – brilliant, twisted, and brilliant playing, too. I love all the distinct personalities you can hear in all of the members of the band."

Singles Going Steady Buzzcocks
"I love the Buzzcocks and, again, it's just brilliant songwriting, with real mood-lifting energy and speed to it as well."

ISLAND LIFE

Islands, the band's most immediate, fresh-sounding collection since the heady rush of springtime romanticism that was 2001's *Free All Angels*, takes its name from the album's geographically adventurous writing sessions. Wheeler, recalibrating after the breakup of his marriage, sought solace in the isolation of Japan's Naoshima island, Mallorca – once home to poet Robert Graves, the Greek island of Santorini and Lambay Island, off the coast of Dublin. The final stop on his globetrotting tour of the world's islands was the band's own Manhattan studio in New York, and Wheeler acknowledges the influence of each of those settings on his songwriting. "I hear little bits of it in some of the song stories," he says. "The last show of our tour was in Japan and I had a little bit of time. I'd heard about these islands I'd always wanted to see, which have a lot of art galleries and an incongruous mix of isolated, beautiful nature with amazing architecture. It was the start of a bit of a pilgrimage.

"A few months later, I wanted to go to Deià. I like Robert Graves and wanted to see where he used to live. There's a great record by Fionn Regan, *100 Acres Of Sycamore*, that he wrote in Deià, and Kevin Ayers used to live there, so there was a bit of rock 'n' roll history. After that, I went to Santorini. I kind of felt a theme developing, and thought, 'I should go and do more writing on islands'.

"Then I went to Lambay, off the coast of Dublin. Some friends own the island, and it was the most isolated of all – there are only six people living there year-round. Probably by the third island, I realised it was a good little pattern, and we were recording in Manhattan where our studio is – that's a completely different thing, obviously, but with all the islands I went to, I wanted a bit of isolation for the writing."

Seeking new ways of unlocking his creative process for the band's first album since 2015's *Kablammo!*, Wheeler turned to some unusual writing techniques – with prolific results.

"When Justin from The Vaccines was living in New York I met him, and he does this thing before he starts writing every album, where he tries to write 20 songs in 12 hours. He roped me into doing it and I was actually shocked that I got a few good songs out of it.

"I got into trying to do it as a regular thing, but I could never get anywhere near 20 songs, as I like to dabble in production a bit. Eventually, I got into this regular thing

Alex John Beck

Getty

of doing 10 songs in 10 hours and I get a lot of good ideas out of that. Most of the record springs out of it, and I think over a few years, I've got about 250 song ideas out of it.

"A lot of rubbish comes out of it, but also a lot of fresh ideas, because a few songs into each day, I start going off on tangents, and there's no pressure. Sometimes, when I'm at my most relaxed, not really caring what comes out, I get songs that never would have been written if I'd been trying. Because of the time pressure, I'm forced to finish ideas that I'm not really sure of. Before the inner critic can come into play, I have to finish the song.

"The song *Buzzkill*, I would have said: 'This is too stupid' and stopped, but I finished it and I've had a really good response from people about the song."

STEPHEN FUNDS THE RECORD

Now a three-piece again after second guitarist Charlotte Hatherley's 10-year spell in the band, the chemistry among the founder members of Ash is still as strong as when they juggled their A-Level homework with playing the Camden Falcon and appearing on *Top Of The Pops*.

"We're like brothers, really and we've got a really fun way of working together," says Wheeler. "Two of us have lived in New York for 12 years and Rick lives in Scotland. My favourite time with the band is when we're working on new material, a long time before anyone's going to hear it. It always reminds me of when we were 15 getting together demo tapes and working on ideas, and the three of us buzzing about it – that hasn't changed at all." The band's first 7", 1994's *Jack Names The Planets*, was funded by radio plugger Stephen Taverner, who gave the trio £300 to go into the studio based purely on hearing an early version of *Girl From Mars*.

Originals from the first run of 1,000 on Taverner's La La Land label are now pretty scarce, although Wheeler did have the foresight to secure one.

"*Jack Names The Planets* was really cool," he recalls. "I was amazed at the trust of this guy who sent £300 for us to go and record having not even met us, just based on our demo tape. He went on to become our manager, so it was definitely a good punt by him. It was awesome getting our first slab of vinyl, it felt very real. Steve Lamacq played it. I was 17, doing my homework and this was the radio show I always used to listen to doing my homework. Now he was playing us! I couldn't believe it, I ran jumping through the house.

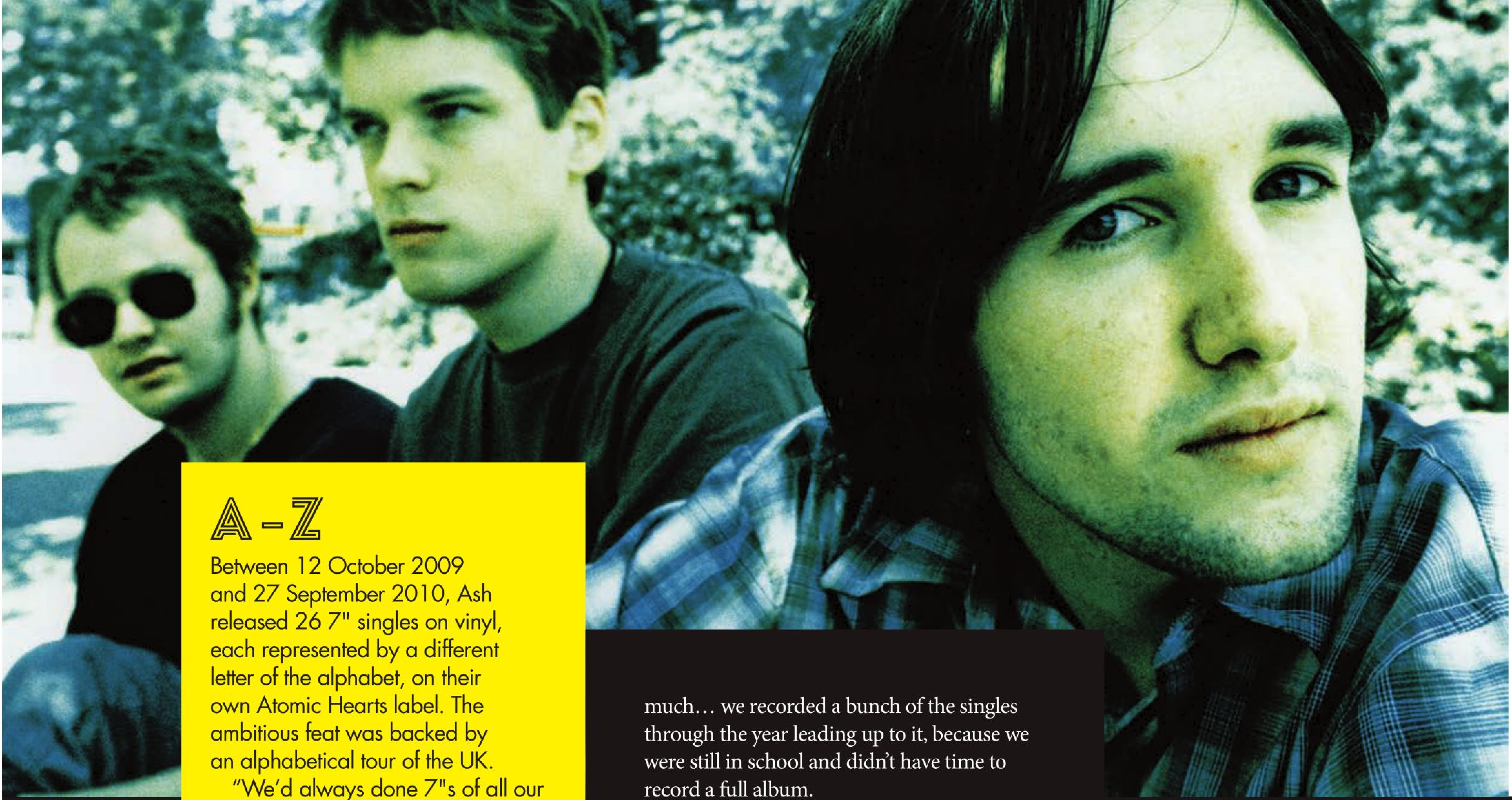
"I've got one or two copies of it, and a lot of our early records I'd try to get a stash of 10 for myself, but some of the early ones were so rare that I only got one."

That first release was followed in October 1994 by *Trailer* and 18 months later by *1977*, which crashed into the UK chart at No. 1, going on to sell a million copies, with

> "IT WAS AWESOME GETTING OUR FIRST SLAB OF VINYL. STEVE LAMACQ PLAYED IT"

Goldfinger and *Oh Yeah* Top Five singles. The album, recorded with Oasis producer Owen Morris at Rockfield, remains one of the most potent snapshots of the Britpop era. Wheeler says the series of gigs the band played to celebrate the album's 20-year anniversary gave them fresh impetus to start work on *Islands*.

"It was nice coming back and working on the record following those shows," he ▶



Getty

A–Z

Between 12 October 2009 and 27 September 2010, Ash released 26 7" singles on vinyl, each represented by a different letter of the alphabet, on their own Atomic Hearts label. The ambitious feat was backed by an alphabetical tour of the UK.

"We'd always done 7"s of all our catalogue and we still persevered with vinyl when people weren't doing it much," says Wheeler. "I was very fond of it when we were at school and didn't have time to record the whole *1977* album – we did those singles every three months. I was a big fan of when The Wedding Present did their singles series as well, I thought that was really cool. Around that time, we could see albums weren't getting the same buzz and attention as they were before, and it really devalued it when people could download records for free… It was partly mourning the death of albums, but I felt like doing something different creatively, too, because we'd just been album-tour-album-tour for a long time.

"We'd set up our own studio to record *Twilight Of The Innocents*, so we had a place where we could become a bit of a factory and do something like that. It was just having the freedom to stretch our wings a bit, creatively."

says. "*1977* is a great album to play live as a three-piece. There's a simplicity to a lot of the songs, and it definitely gave me the confidence to know that we can have really simple songs like *Kung Fu* – and *Buzzkill* is not a million miles away from that in terms of simplicity. It's one of the albums we've revisited most, and it still stands up well. I did feel a kind of pressure when I wrote it. The first half of it, not so much… we recorded a bunch of the singles through the year leading up to it, because we were still in school and didn't have time to record a full album.

"*Kung Fu*, *Girl From Mars* and *Angel Interceptor* were all put out as singles leading up to it and they all took off, it was amazing. Then I had to write the rest of the record to follow up all these hits! It was quite a challenge. I wasn't really ready for it, although it was all I'd ever wanted. It was a mad time, those whole couple of years."

Now a resident of Brooklyn, NYC, Wheeler is spoilt for choice when it comes to record shopping. "I live very close to Rough Trade, and there's also Academy Records in Greenpoint, near me. We had a really fun day – the Record Store Crawl for Record Store Day, where they organise a crawl on a bus through a bunch of different neighbourhoods. We played on the bus between stops and we went up to Astoria in Queens and down to Greenpoint. It was great fun hanging out with a bunch of fellow record nerds."

PAST MASTERS

Reflecting on the records that inspired the band in their early days, Wheeler says: "When we started out, *Nevermind* was massive for us; Pixies' *Doolittle*, Teenage Fanclub's *Bandwagonesque*, Mudhoney's *Superfuzz Bigmuff*, Sonic Youth's *Dirty* and *Goo*, and before that, I was really into Guns N' Roses' *Appetite For Destruction*, The Stooges' first album… I listened to *…Spiders From Mars* by Bowie a lot making *1977*, The Beach Boys, ABBA…"

Creatively stimulated by his experimental songwriting approach and enjoying the company of his bandmates of 26 years, Wheeler's solo project that yielded the album *Lost Domain* in 2014 is on ice, as Ash gear up for more touring and an eighth studio album.

"WE WERE STILL IN SCHOOL AND DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO RECORD A FULL ALBUM"

"I still love touring and I'd like to do more than we do," he says. "The other two guys have kids, so we don't go out on the long relentless tours like we used to, and I kind of miss that lifestyle. Now we tour for two or three weeks and take a break. I love travelling and playing live. 10 years of my life was touring, and there was a bit of a lack of normality. It's good there's a bit more balance in life now, but I really enjoyed the travelling and seeing the world.

"We've actually pretty much written a new album already – you see, I've got all of these millions of songs! It's going to be a bit slow recording this year, as we're doing a lot of touring. It's just trying to fit it in, but we'll hopefully have another album next year. It's quite a bit more experimental, maybe a bit more like the experimentation of the A-Z series. We'll see what direction it ultimately takes when we record it, but it's quite different at the moment." ●

MY LIFE IN VINYL

ALAN MCGEE

The legendary Creation founder, who worked with My Bloody Valentine, Ride and Primal Scream before discovering Oasis and managing The Libertines, gives **Ben Wardle** the inside track on 12 albums that have shaped his career in music…

So much more than 'the man who discovered Oasis', Alan McGee is a record-business groundbreaker. He sits at the top table along with game-changing A&R legends such as Island's Chris Blackwell, Interscope's Jimmy Iovine, and the late Ahmet Ertegun who set up Atlantic Records in 1947. Like them, McGee combines visionary ability to spot talent with a streetwise, no-nonsense business sense.

From its humble beginnings with singles by McGee's own band, Biff Bang Pow!, to orchestrating the fusion of rock and dance with Primal Scream, to seeing him shaking hands with the Prime Minister, McGee's 'bedroom' label Creation Records' rise, as well as his parallel career as a music manager, have been well documented in books and on film.

When we speak to him, McGee is in buoyant form – enjoying managing his current roster, which includes Black Grape, The Bluetones and Cast. Amazingly, he no longer owns any vinyl, preferring to stream all his music, but he was happy to sift through the virtual tower of records he's been involved with in his four decades in the business, and pick out the ones which best tell his story.

Alan McGee, pictured in 2013 – McGee is currently running Creation Management with Simon Fletcher

Alamy

FELT
FOREVER BREATHES THE LONELY WORD

Creation
September 1986

"I've rediscovered Felt this year. I stopped Creation Records 18-plus years ago and I hadn't played any Felt since, but this Christmas in Wales I played some and my 17-year-old daughter, who has got great taste, said: 'What's this, dad? I like this one'. We put out four albums by Lawrence [Felt's mononymous mainstay], but this is truly the best one. I'd been friends with Lawrence since 1984. I was 23 and he was 21, and he was a big star to me and Bobby Gillespie and people like that. In 1985, he left Cherry Red and said he wanted to be on Creation. We couldn't believe it! We were a bedroom label and he'd been on an actual record company. "It was the equivalent of being this little dude and getting a really elegant woman to go out with you! Cherry Red was probably what Creation was trying to be… I loved [Cherry Red A&R] Mike Alway… I wanted to be like them more than Rough Trade. The album was incredibly well received… If I was starting a label now and we put that out, it would still be heralded as a great record."

Alan's Choice
All The People I Like Are Those That Are Dead

THE HOUSE OF LOVE
THE HOUSE OF LOVE

Creation
June 1988

"[First single] *Shine On* had got a little bit of traction, but nobody was interested in *Real Animal.* We nearly went bankrupt around the time. My wife had left me, I had around 12 grand left in the bank and I spent it all on mixing the House Of Love record with Pat Collier. We made a fucking amazing record: I thought it was going to do okay, but I didn't see it really going. Then *Christine* came out and everybody went: 'This is fucking amazing!'. Jeff Barrett did a great job on press and it blew up. It sold 100,000 copies. Then we did *Destroy The Heart,* and after that it was a major-label feeding frenzy. If Terry Bickers hadn't left, I believe they might've got there and become an absolutely huge band: they were good enough. The fatal flaw was Guy Chadwick, because he was bonkers. He was a very grounded guy, a brilliant writer, but he shouldn't have done drugs…"

Alan's Choice
Man To Child

RIDE
NOWHERE

Creation
October 1990

"I was in the East West office with Richard Norris from The Grid [Alan managed Norris] and the A&R guy, Cally, played Ride and it was phenomenal. He said he didn't know if they were going to sign to East West, so we arranged a meeting with them. I don't think they could understand anything I said at first! We signed them and made them famous, but they ended up signing to Sire for the rest of the world! Ride were like the way [the record business] should be: they record, the record's out three months later, everyone makes a profit, they go back in the studio… It was really good. *Nowhere* sold 100,000 copies really fast, so that created a lot of income for the label.

"We never used to put bands on the cover of our records – because I'd been a musician, I liked obscure thought processes…"

Alan's Choice
Seagull

SLOWDIVE
JUST FOR A DAY

Creation
September 1991

"What's interesting about this band is that on the first album, they were untrendy; the second album, nobody gave a fuck and the third album, you couldn't give it away. But 20 years later, in 2014, they come back and they're headlining to 20,000 people at Primavera [huge Barcelona festival]. That's the power of music!

"They were fans of House Of Love and Ride. We were breaking a lot of these kind of bands and they jumped on it. I showed up at a pub in Windsor and then we put out the first single. I think they were misjudged back in the day. Back then, it wasn't cool to be middle-class, not like now where it's really difficult to be working-class in music! And Slowdive were middle-class, nice kids. But they were a great band. I'm not sure I really got it, like the kids now really get it. Now they're a career band – not a band who come back once a year and play The Garage; they're on tour, all round the world, all year!"

Alan's Choice
Brighter

PRIMAL SCREAM
SCREAMADELICA

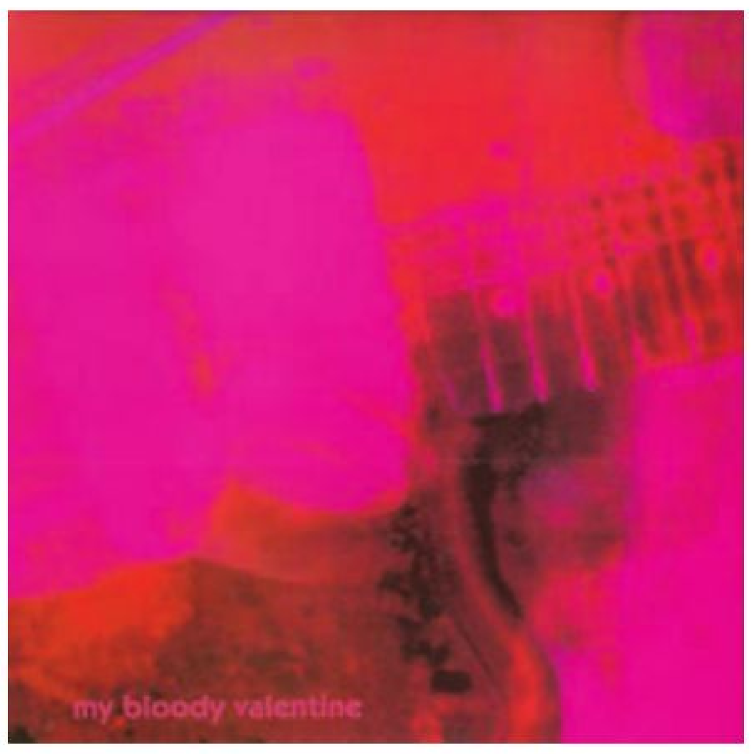
Creation
September 1991

"Before Primal Scream got to *Loaded,* they were on their arse. Nobody wanted to know them. Nobody gave a fuck. You couldn't get them arrested – and we tried! But within a year of putting *Loaded* out, they became arguably one of the biggest groups in Britain. I met Andy Weatherall [producer of lead single *Loaded* and arguably the catalyst who made Primal Scream successful] with Bobby and Jeff Barrett at a *Boy's Own* do in Brighton in summer 1989. He was wearing a Factory Records T-shirt with 'Touched By The Hand Of God' on it. The album was put together like a jigsaw, which is probably why it's such a great record – every session was a thing in itself. We'd had the hit with *Loaded,* so we went in to do *Come Together,* but the Farley Mix was wrong and the Weatherall Mix with Jesse Jackson on it was great, but Bobby wasn't singing on it again. So Bobby left the band! I had to keep the band together, so I phoned up Farley and said: 'Put Bobby back in the fuckin' mix!'… When we put out the album, there was no reason to see [success] coming. But in the first three days, we went silver – we ran out of records! If we'd made enough, we'd've had a No. 1! I gave Paul Cannell [the late artist who designed all of Primal Scream's cover art] the upstairs of our Hackney office to do his painting – that says a lot about the times! I remember the original *Screamadelica* artwork was for a club flyer, but in blue. We didn't have a sleeve and Bobby wanted it to be like the MC5. I remember thinking, 'that's him reverting back to the 1960s again'. So we put that and the flyer and some other ideas around it… Bobby chose the flyer, but he said: 'I want it in red'."

Alan's Choice
Higher Than The Sun

MY BLOODY VALENTINE
LOVELESS

Creation
November 1991



"It came out six weeks after *Screamadelica* and two weeks before [Teenage Fanclub's] *Bandwagonesque*. We were going bankrupt – we needed to put records out!

"I was obsessed about MBV. One of the great things about Creation in that period in 1989 and 1990 was that I was so obsessed with the Valentines that I started signing all the bands who sounded like them! So I signed Slowdive, Ride, Moonshake and Adorable, who were all really into the Valentines! As I've got older, I realise I've got a really obsessive nature; luckily, I was obsessed with the right band!

"[Getting it made] was a bittersweet thing, a nightmare, really… It cost £270K, which was a lot back in the day. But it was brilliant when we got the record; it was a really great album, but I couldn't really enjoy it at the time. It did pretty well for an album that noisy.

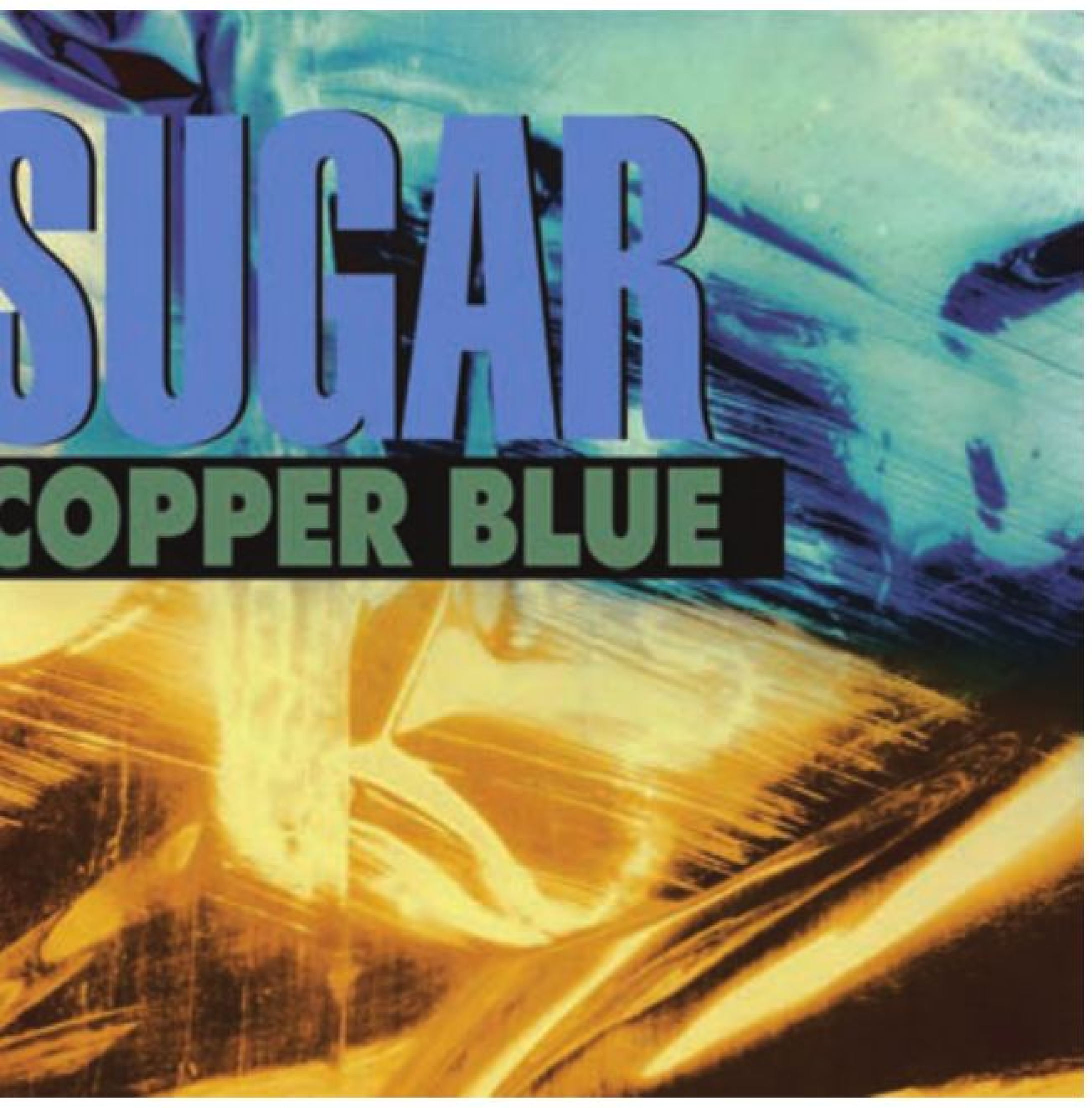
"Kevin Shields was really fucking with the listener at the point: he sent me *To Here Knows When* and it sounded like [does a pretty good rendition of a swirling ocean], so I said to him: 'I think you've sent me a bad cassette copy'. And he was like: 'You don't get it!'.

Alan's Choice
To Here Knows When

SUGAR
COPPER BLUE

Creation
September 1992

"Bob Mould had put out two solo albums on Virgin, which hadn't sold, but I was a fan of Hüsker Dü. *Loveless* had happened and he loved that album, so he came to my office. Because he'd been on Virgin, he'd been getting big advances, but I offered him 10K. We argued about it for months and eventually, he realised I wasn't going to move… I'm so glad we did it, but why we got the deal was because I didn't really care whether we got it or not! We were killing it at the time with the Fanclub, Ride, Boo Radleys… When we put *Copper Blue* out, it went in at No. 9. It's a fantastic record, but that was a shocker; I don't think Bob had ever been in the British charts. Andy Saunders [press officer] played a blinder, he was getting front covers everywhere. Bob was due a bit of a roll because Kurt Cobain was really influenced by Hüsker Dü."



Alan's Choice
Hoover Dam

Photoshot

OASIS
(WHAT'S THE STORY) MORNING GLORY?

Creation
October 1995

"They were a monumental band. It all fucking collided at one moment; it was their destiny, it was my destiny. Was I particularly amazing at doing it? No, but shit fucking went down; I was there, they were there. Caroline Elleray [head of A&R, Universal Music Publishing] just told me this – no one knows this story! In the 90s, she used to work at a rehearsal studio in Manchester and she did an A&R showcase with Oasis that loads of A&R went to, including Jonathan Dickins [then A&R at Warners, now Adele's manager] and they all passed!

"The only person who knew what was going on was Noel because he was writing the songs. I never thought we'd do seven or eight million *Definitely Maybes*; never saw it. And when I first heard *Wonderwall* and *Don't Look Back In Anger* in April '95, I did think they were great, but I never thought we'd sell 23 million! [The press] didn't have a clue. Oasis were the antithesis of what the kind of studenty people who wrote for the music papers back then were into: Oasis were stoners from Burnage and these guys were happier with the Manic Street Preachers talking about the politics of politics…

"It helped break Oasis when Damon decided to move the [*Country House* single] release date. Blur were so much bigger than Oasis – they'd sold two million *Parklifes* and we'd done just half a million *Definitely Maybes*. It was unbelievable to be on the national news."

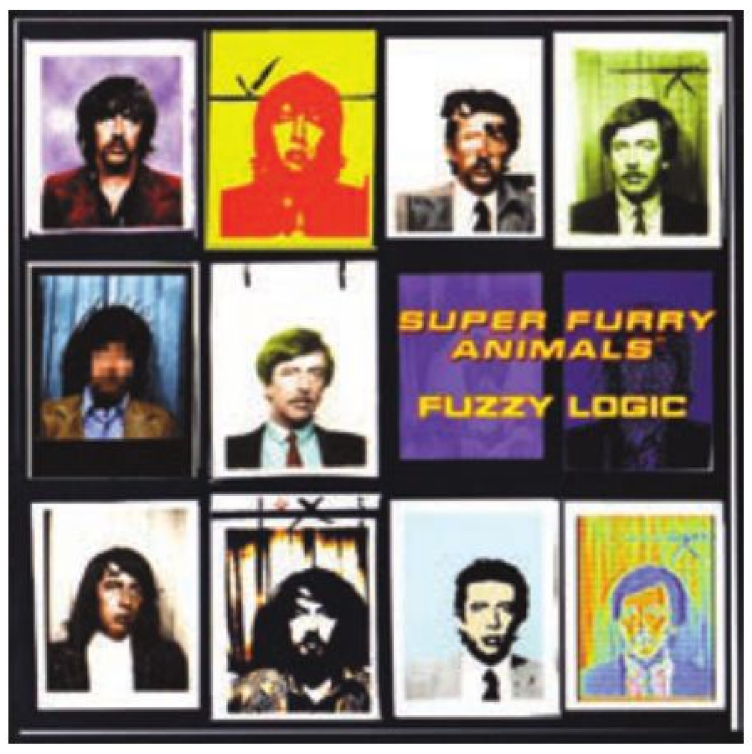
Alan's Choice *Wonderwall*

SUPER FURRY ANIMALS
FUZZY LOGIC

Creation
May 1996

"It was Mark Bowen's signing [Creation A&R man, who went on to set up Wichita] – he spotted it. He was on it from Day One, and really in with them. On the night they played, I had a hot date with somebody and I had to blow it out to go to the fucking Camden Falcon with Mark to see them. And I had to stand and watch Pearl Lowe's band Powder… Then SFA played and they had great tunes. Mark took me backstage and they were all sitting there with spliffs hanging out of their mouths. We demo'd *Something For The Weekend* and it sounded like a Blur song to me, so we signed them off the back of that. They were a great signing, because nobody expected Creation to sign a bunch of opinionated Welsh anarchists. It was good! I was responsible for *The Man Don't Give A Fuck* being their big song because that was going to be a B-side. Mark and Dick [Green, Alan's partner in Creation] put it on a 12" as an extra track. They didn't see it for what it was, but I heard it and six weeks before release date, said: 'Fuck off! That's the single, put that out!'. And it went Top 20, and it's still their biggest song!"

Alan's Choice
Something For The Weekend



THE HIVES
YOUR NEW FAVOURITE BAND

Poptones
October 2001

"We did put out some good stuff on Poptones [Alan's label founded in 1999 after Creation's dissolution], like The Hives, The BellRays, Cosmic Rough Riders – but nobody wants to remember it! I saw The Hives on TV in Germany when I was doing promo for Poptones. We licensed the first two albums and we chose the best songs and came up with *Your New Favourite Band*. We'd done that for Cosmic Rough Riders, which sold 100,000 albums. This did even better."

Alan's Choice
Supply And Demand

Alan in the Creation Records offices in 1997

Alamy

THE LIBERTINES
THE LIBERTINES

Rough Trade
August 2004

"The previous manager resigned in 2003. Don't blame her! So James Endeacott [Rough Trade A&R man] decided that I was the only person who could mend Pete and Carl's relationship, because Pete had burgled Carl's house. So I went down to see Pete at his sister's in Catford. We went to the pub and he says to me: 'Who's your favourite band?', and I told him The Beatles, so he says: 'Go and put five records on'. So I put on *Hello, Goodbye*, you know. Then I asked him who his favourite band was and he said: 'Chas & Dave', and he put five of their records on. He'd missed three probation periods, so I said: 'You're going to go down', and he said: 'No, I'm not'. I went away thinking he was a nice guy, but not thinking very much about it. And then he went to prison.

"After that, I went to America for a couple of months and while I was in New York, I get a phone call from Endeacott, who says: 'He's out! We're doing a comeback!'. I was totally indignant that he'd phoned me up to try to get me to come back to the UK! But a week or so later, I was back and they appointed me as manager. They were already cult-big but we got them bigger; we didn't break them with records, we broke them with gigs. We put three Forums on sale and we sold them. Then the next day, we put three Brixtons on sale. And they sold, too. That was April 2004.

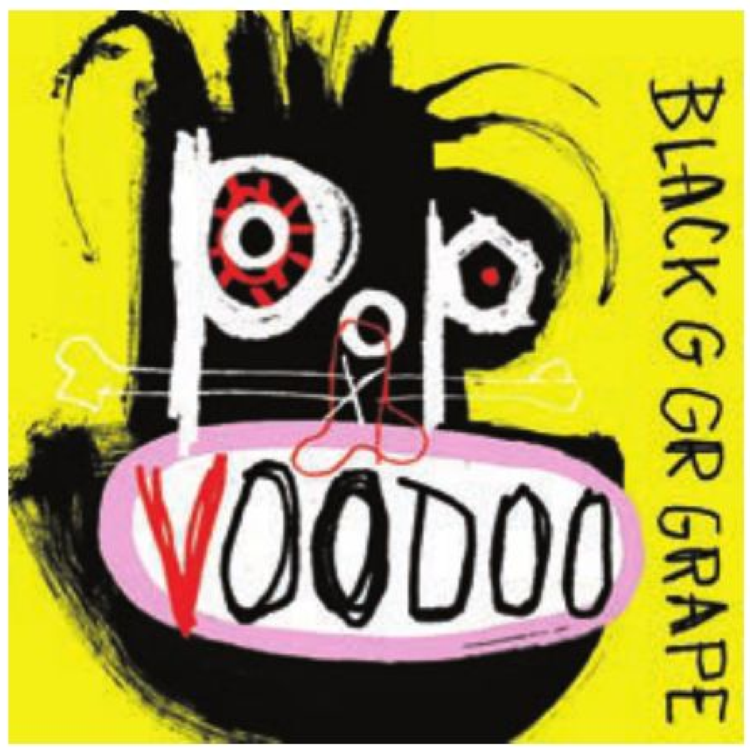
"After that, we put out *Can't Stand Me Now* and it exploded. We sold a million records. While they were making the record, my role as manager was the same as it was at a record company – Pete didn't want to give us the best songs… I think he was already thinking of Babyshambles… But we got *The Man Who Would Be King*, *Music When The Lights Go Out* and *Can't Stand Me Now*. The only one we never got on the album was *Hooligans On E*.

"The irony was there was so much heroin going on during the record, but Rough Trade said the band were eating too much food! I know! The band were racking up £200-a-day food bills while they were mixing at Island Studios. Rough Trade complained they wanted a discount on what we were eating! Never mind all the heroin and crack being done in the toilet!"

Alan's Choice
Can't Stand Me Now

Getty

Shaun Ryder and McGee in London in 2016



BLACK GRAPE
POP VOODOO

UMC
July 2017

"I genuinely think that Shaun has been the best lyricist in Britain for the last 25 years. He's a poet [at this point, McGee recites from memory the opening verses from *Kinky Afro*]. Tony Wilson had it right – he's an unrecognised genius lyricist, just like Mark E Smith was.

"Johnny Chandler at Universal is a genius dude and he just offered us a deal for Black Grape out of the blue. So I sent Shaun with [producer] Youth off to Spain and literally 10 days later, they came back with 10 songs! I'll be honest with you, I was worried we were going to get it in the Top 40.

"I was fronting it out to Shaun that it was going to be okay, but I was worried. But Universal phoned me and said, you're not going to believe this and I thought, 'Uh-oh, we're going to be No. 72…' but they told us the midweek was No. 1 – we couldn't believe it. It was a weak chart, so we were No. 1 on 4,000 sales, but still…

"On the first track from the album, *Everything You Know Is Wrong*, we had to get an actor in to be Donald Trump, because Donald Trump's so mental he'd probably sue us for a million dollars!"

Alan's Choice
Nine Lives

FUTURE SOUNDS
As the conversation begins to wind down, we ask McGee if he's got plans for anything beyond management.

"It's never been more difficult for new music to take… And I don't think it's because I'm old, I think it's really, really tough now for new bands. You used to be able to go to the *NME* to find out what was going on. Now, the hardest thing is that there is nowhere to go to work out what the fuck's going on… Mind you, I might come back with a 7" label…" Watch this space. ●

When You're Strange...

Beautiful people: (from l-r) Mick Quinn, Gaz Coombes, Rob Coombes and Danny Goffey

After a decade away, the return of Supergrass for a 25th anniversary tour and boxset celebrates a band who were always pop masters – while never quite fitting in. **John Earls** hears from four men determined to keep their identity

Supergrass' cartoon logo was one of the classic images of the 90s, immediately marking out the trio's distinctive looks and personalities: spiky-haired pixieish frontman Gaz Coombes, long-haired wildman drummer Danny Goffey and elder statesman bassist Mick Quinn. Gaz's older brother, laidback hippy keyboardist Rob, was seamlessly incorporated into the imagery when he joined officially for fourth album *Life On Other Planets* in 2002.

That they thrived together for six albums is testament to honing each other's skills and individualism while keeping a heads-down work ethic. Supergrass are too open and approachable to be called "insular" but, well, there's a reason their new boxset and accompanying Best Of are called *The Strange Ones*. It's an otherness that Gaz feels is the band's most potent quality. "I'm really proud of what we achieved and, more than anything, how we achieved it," he says, explaining the reasons why they're back, 10 years after their final show in 2010. "We kept our own identity. That's hard to do. It's hard not to fall into the trap of becoming generic. When pop gets big, it unfortunately usually means it sounds like something else, because there's a template and a formula. When something brand new comes along, it usually gets watered down, but I'm proud that we approached our albums always as a reaction to the music we'd just made."

Mick agrees, citing Supergrass' return as a corrective to the current scene. "Listening back to our gigs for the boxset, there's an element of

Not In It For The Money

While Supergrass' boxset *The Strange Ones: 1994-2008* is commendably all-encompassing and reasonably priced at £150, *LLV*'s review in issue 35 had one complaint: their six albums are included on vinyl, but frustratingly on picturediscs. It's a format Mick Quinn admits isn't ideal, but is an aspect he wants the band and their label BMG to address soon.

"Generally, I think the boxset is great value for money," Mick insists. "But we've had to make some compromises. In the main, having the albums on picturedisc was about re-evaluating our artwork. I was able to concentrate on getting the artwork onto the picturediscs, and I'm especially pleased with the one for *I Should Coco*. BMG set the budget and suggested how to make it cost-effective, and those picturediscs came within the budget. I oversaw the mastering of the picturediscs for the boxset and I wasn't disappointed with how they came back."

Having overseen the boxset, Mick hopes the albums will receive standalone reissues on heavyweight audiophile black vinyl. "Now the boxset has happened, we can go back and address the vinyl quality," he explains. "Doing that is a high priority. If you're that much of an audiophile, the original pressings are out there, but I know they go for big cash, which is why I'm angling for the standalones."

Although he wouldn't be drawn on what the release will be, Mick also revealed that he was finishing off the artwork for a Supergrass release for this year's Record Store Day.

of what was to come… that was pretty amazing," the singer acknowledges. "There were only ever two or three cassettes of that demo. I don't even know if the other boys still have theirs."

The boxset features the six albums on both CD and picturedisc vinyl, with an additional seven CDs of live songs, studio demos and B-sides. Mick bought several live bootlegs online, as well as asking superfans to go through their collections: the holy grail was unearthing a full gig of Supergrass' tour with a four-piece horn section for second album *In It For The Money*, finally found via a concert at an Irish showground. The boxset deserves to see *Diamond Hoo Ha* reassessed: a flop on its release, it stands up as anarchic glam with the same carefree mood of the band's roots.

"I'm pleased you think that, as it's an important record for me," Rob agrees. "In the later days, making music became more difficult as our lives became fuller. We were carrying the baggage from our lives into the studio. On *Diamond Hoo Ha*, we really got together again, making a commitment to leave that baggage to one side for the short period of three weeks in Berlin the record took." Mick adds: "I hadn't really addressed our later stuff for a long time. I was surprised that there are some areas of prog-rock in there!"

LACKING GRAVITAS

Does having such an exhaustive boxset put Supergrass into the category of heritage artist? "There are some crazily expensive boxsets out there. I've seen several for The Beach Boys," ponders Gaz. "But you feel they warrant it, because they had 40 years of No. 1 albums. When I first heard our boxset was £150, it was more than I expected, because I'm not sure we have the gravitas of those heritage artists. But I think our boxset is great, just about right for what's on there.

"Sometimes, the stuff you don't release doesn't get released for a reason. That's why I don't buy posthumous releases. When I pop

Gaz Coombes first entered the music world at age 14 as the lead singer in Oxford band The Jennifers

it, I don't really want my wife going through my ProTools demos. There'll be a message there, saying 'Leave this, it's rubbish!'"

That attitude helps explain why no demos from the sessions for Supergrass' unfinished seventh album are in the boxset. In 2009, the quartet began the krautrock-inspired *Release The Drones*. "Some of the backing tracks are amazing," Mick reveals. "There are some harmonies, but no good vocal takes – only one song had finished lyrics. Releasing them as they are would do those songs a disservice. Whether we revisit them if we ever record again, I don't know."

Ah yes, will Supergrass ever record again? It's clear talking to them there really are no definite plans one way or the other beyond the tour starting this month and a festival run that includes playing immediately before headliners Duran Duran at Isle Of Wight.

SAME OLD JOKES

Gaz is pleased the band's dynamics have stayed constant: "We've all evolved as people, but the raw connection is the same whenever we get together. We can enjoy those moments, and it'll be great to hang out again on tour. But we'll probably steer clear of studios for now. New songs? It's not on my radar at the moment, but you never know. If we write something on the road or in soundcheck, that could be worth documenting somehow."

Mick takes up the thread, saying: "If we get into a creative collusion, this could run and run. We'll have to see what takes more precedence in our lives, but if we get over-ridden by Supergrass, I'm sure we'll run with it." Gaz, who is halfway through writing his fourth solo album, points out: "This tour opens up whether we want to be Supergrass again. Releasing new material would change everything again, because then you're back in that machine. Whether we all want that, I don't know, but never say never."

Mick turned 50 last year and, while Gaz is still a relatively youthful 43, the idea that the perennial kids of *I Should Coco* are starting to enter their sixth decade is hard to grasp for a generation of fans, let alone the band themselves. "Predictably, we've got the same in-jokes from 20 years ago," laughs Mick. "At least we've got some new jokes too, as well as a lot of history and a lot of shared reference points. Some of the band have become more political and we work out how to deal with that side of our relationships. In essence, while we've become four middle-aged blokes, we haven't become four entrenched old gits."

Indeed, the biggest problem facing Supergrass is just what to play on tour. "We'll be giving people what they want, and the obvious big songs take up 85-90% of the set," muses Rob. "But a lot of the other songs have stood the test of time and that's trickier to pick out. Having hours of good songs to fit into 90 minutes? That's a nice problem to have." ●

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Road To Ruin...

Having spent "around £100" on the alternative 'cowboy' sleeve of David Bowie's *The Man Who Sold The World*, Gaz Coombes is Supergrass' biggest vinyl head.

Gaz, who names Piccadilly in Manchester as his favourite record shop, says: "Vinyl has a holy place. You can over-romanticise it, but the soundbites about its warmth, character and tactile nature are all true." Gaz's best recent bargain was a Shangri-Las album for £3 at the local Cancer Research shop in Oxford.

Mick Quinn mainly buys second-hand records. The most he's spent is £35, but he was delighted to find a cheap copy of Can's *Ege Bamyesi* recently, saying: "I've been listening to it for 20 years but, on vinyl, I'm finding little fluttery details I hadn't heard before."

Rob Coombes calls himself "a slightly recovered" vinyl addict, losing his obsession when he was no longer able to find a stylus for his Sansui turntable. The vinyl revival led the keyboardist to get his Sansui back out of storage, with his daughter's gift of Pink Floyd's *The Final Cut* one of his favourite ever Christmas presents. "Not returning records to friends after you've borrowed them should be punishable by three months inside," laughs Rob. "I lost all The Orb's records. Whenever I lose a record like that, I always end up thinking that the album was much better than it really was."

YUKI KUROYANAGI

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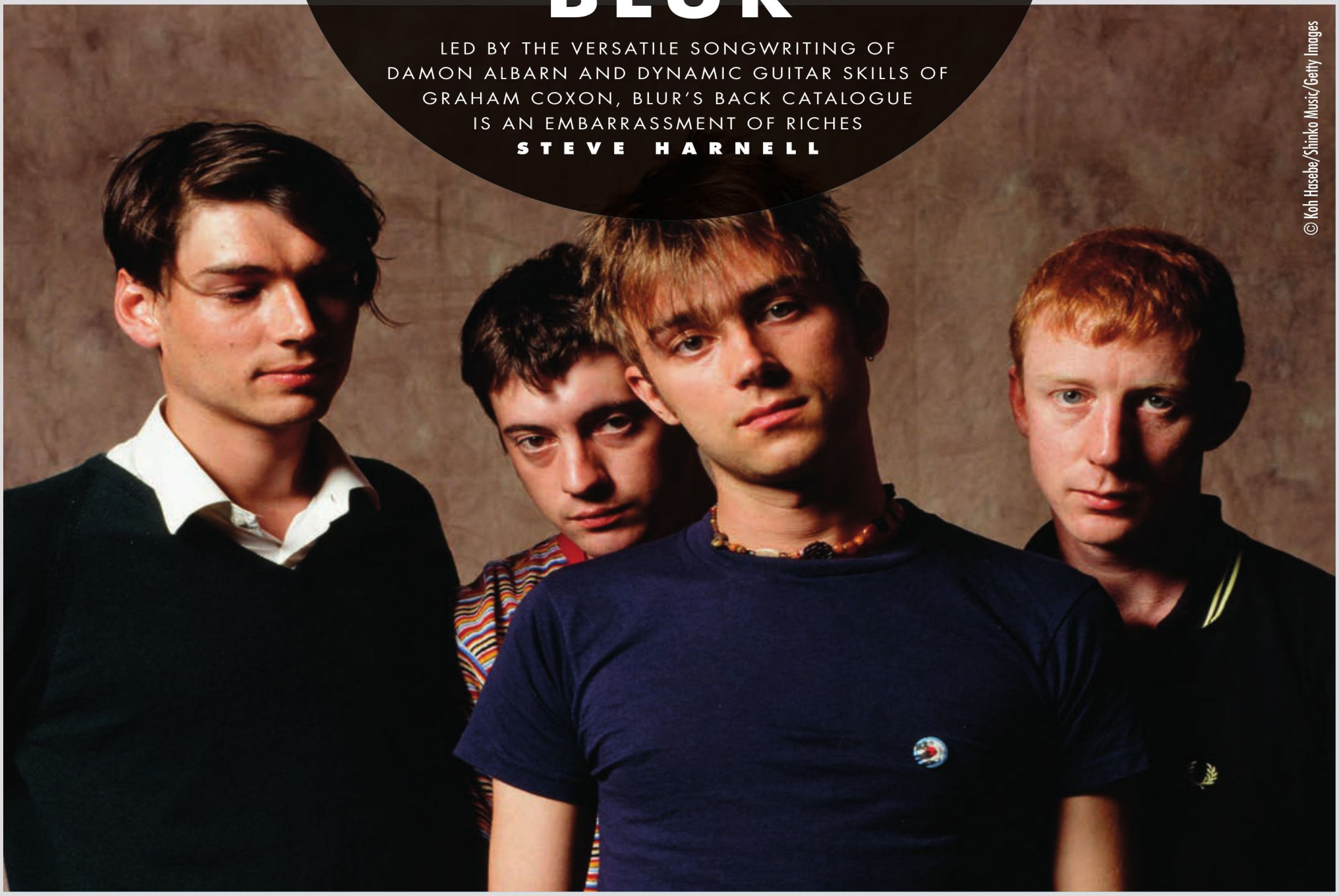
YUKI KUROYANAGI

BLUR

LED BY THE VERSATILE SONGWRITING OF DAMON ALBARN AND DYNAMIC GUITAR SKILLS OF GRAHAM COXON, BLUR'S BACK CATALOGUE IS AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

STEVE HARNELL



© Koh Hasebe/Shinko Music/Getty Images

It seems laughable now at almost 30 years' remove that when Blur first emerged they were viewed with suspicion as baggy bandwagon jumpers; Happy Mondays-lite interlopers intent on rinsing the last drop of action out of the fashion for *Funky Drummer* rhythms.

But while Damon Albarn's versatility as a songwriter over the past three decades has often been viewed as dilettantism – he can flit effortlessly between pure pop to punk, music hall to cultured balladeering – the quality of his work has been astonishing. When the public sat up and took notice of *There's No Other Way*, firing the band into the Top 10, Blur were seen as yet another addition to the current roster of dance-rock bands. But they were so much more than Mondays wannabes and in a different league to the likes of The Farm, Flowered Up, Inspiral Carpets and The Mock Turtles.

Leisure has at least two trump cards; Albarn's singular ability as a songwriter and the immense talent of guitarist Graham Coxon – along with The Stone Roses' John Squire and The Verve's Nick McCabe, he's the pre-eminent six-string technician of his era.

Albarn dislikes only two albums in his career, *Leisure*, which he describes as "awful" and *The Great Escape* ("messy"). He's wrong about Blur's debut, though. While it has a little filler, there are enough standout moments here to make this one of the best opening gambit LPs of the decade.

Despite four producers having a hand in *Leisure*, it still feels coherent; no doubt down to Albarn and Coxon's assured hands on the sonic tiller.

The woozy psychedelia of opener *She's So High* impresses and the funky *Bang* finds Coxon and drummer Dave Rowntree locking down a spectacular spiralling groove. Alongside classic single *There's No Other Way*, *Sing* hinted that this quartet were capable of something rather special, head and shoulders above knocking out indie disco baggy floorfillers; the dark piano-led epic boasted an ambition that far exceeded the material around it.

> "FRONT-LOADED WITH THE BEST MATERIAL, BLUR BREEZED INTO THE TOP 10 WITH DEBUT ALBUM LEISURE"

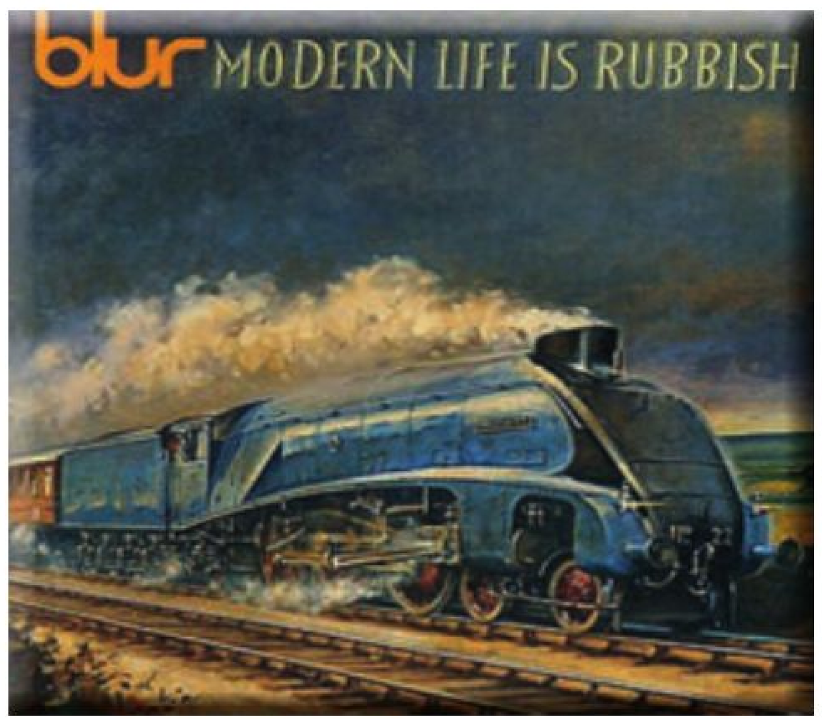
There's instrumental grit behind parts of *Slow Down* as Coxon cranks up the overdrive settings on his amp; Albarn's innate melodic tendencies given a striking counterpoint with the guitarist's predilection for throwing My Bloody Valentine-style distorted guitars into the mix – at the time Coxon would check out Syndrome, the Oxford Street basement club favoured by Creation and 4AD bands. Meanwhile, *Bad Day* is another blatant attempt to write in a baggy style, and Rowntree recycles a similar beat on *High Cool*. But Albarn's flair for melancholy is exploited on *Birthday*; a gentle sting in the album's tail.

Frontloaded with the best material, this is far from the full flowering of Blur's genius but it's a strong signifier.

They breezed into the Top 10 with it, but like *Leisure*'s cover star, were about to take a dive into deeper waters.

LEISURE

Released 26 Aug 1991
Label Food
Chart Position
UK No.7 and US –



It takes a lot to dent the confidence of the supremely self-assured Damon Albarn but the relative failure of 1992 non-album single *Popscene* (No.32 in the UK) was a Doc Marten to the bread box.

A disastrous booze-soaked US tour also prompted a radical rethink of the band's musical direction and precipitated a new and wholly Anglocentric songwriting approach.

Keynote track *For Tomorrow* – Damon penned it at his parents' home in Colchester one Christmas Eve – speaks of Primrose Hill and getting lost on the Westway as backing singers coo away enticingly and strings add elegance to the band's most ambitious arrangement to date.

Albarn is by now entering his 'character song' writing phase; *Colin Zeal* the first of countless examples – at their best he enjoys an ironic detachment, at their worst they employ a rather sneering tone that reflected badly on the band (see *The Great Escape* for more).

Blur's winning way with an instantly memorable pop hook comes into its own on the irresistible *Star Shaped* and album centrepiece *Chemical World*, which includes a remarkable gradually-evolving crazed coda that leaves our heads spinning.

Blue Jeans, meanwhile, is a rare glimpse into Albarn's personal life; a simple tale of shopping in Portobello Market that may also have been an insight into his relationship with Elastica's Justine Frischmann who he'd been dating since 1991.

The wonderful *Sunday Sunday* evokes lazy wasted weekends but with an added dose of generation gap culture clash: "You meet an old soldier and talk of the past/ He fought for us in two world wars, and the England he knew is now no more."

"MODERN LIFE IS RUBBISH GAVE THE BAND ENOUGH MOMENTUM TO HAVE ONE LAST CRACK AT THE BIG TIME"

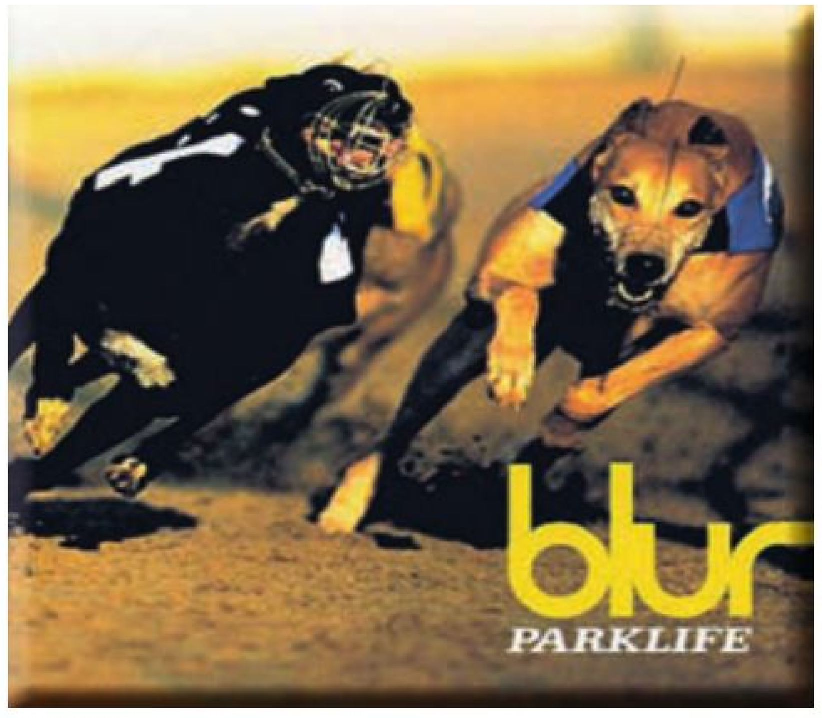
Coxon's crashing riffs power *Advert* and *Coping* while his use of Bowiesque heavily strummed acoustic guitar on several tracks adds a new dimension to Blur's sound.

Miss America impressively recasts the spooked solo years of Syd Barrett into the modern age.

All three singles culled from the record were Top 30 hits in the UK but hardly set the world alight. That said, if *Modern Life Is Rubbish* wasn't the gangbuster smash record Blur were after, it at least gave them enough momentum for one more crack at the big time, and they used that opportunity wisely...

MODERN LIFE IS RUBBISH

Released 10 May 1993
Label Food, SBK
Chart Position
UK No.15 and US –



The mainstream breakthrough album embraced by the critics and public alike, *Parklife* defined an era and went on to sell five million copies.

Released less than three weeks after Kurt Cobain's suicide, this was the set text in Britpop before its initial wide-eyed innocence descended into bloated coke-fuelled chats in the Groucho Club.

Thankfully, Blur ditched the working title of *Soft Porn* and instead created a faux homage to working class life; even if they were well-to-do townies. Like *Modern Life…* there's an abundance of material here as the band pinball from joyous indie disco bangers (*Girls & Boys* and the title track), melancholy ballads (*To The End, This Is A Low* – the latter only finished when Albarn came up with lyrics on the last day of recording sessions) and the gonzo punk fun of *Bank Holiday* and *Jubilee*. There's an almost Reggie Perrin poignancy to *Tracy Jacks*; the tale of a civil servant who goes missing.

The title track now feels totemic, and there was a feeling at the time that Blur were stretching out ahead of the competition with this album centrepiece into unchartered pop waters – Phil Daniels' instantly quotable spoken-word sections were memorised by a generation.

"BRITPOP'S KEY TEXT, BEFORE ITS WIDE-EYED INNOCENCE DESCENDED INTO COKE-FUELLED BLOATEDNESS"

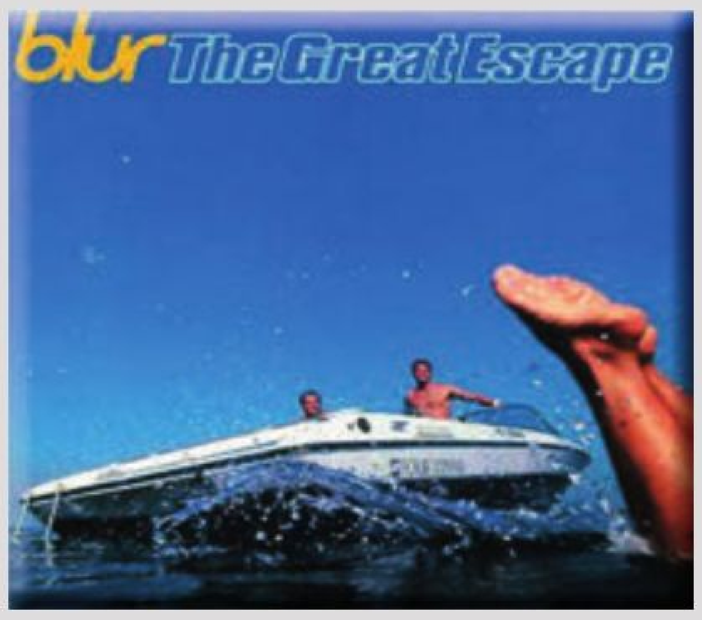
Such was the band's unwavering bravado, they even let bassist Alex James have a crack at singing on the stargazing *Far Out*. *The Debt Collector* also showcased a band never afraid to stretch out (or look back) to new sonic horizons.

The hit singles tend to steal all the glory here, but there's a depth to *Parklife* that rewards deeper listening including Coxon's gloriously atonal guitar solo on *London Loves* (he'd go on to knock out many more over the course of the band's lifespan). Even a throwaway track like the 80-second closer *Lot 105* can't help but raise a smile.

This is quite simply the sound of a band still in love with the possibilities of music-making.

PARKLIFE

Released 25 April 1994
Label Food
Chart Position
UK No.1 and US –



With Albarn feeling distanced from real life by his pop fame and Coxon increasingly marginalised, forever trying to force his alt-rock tastes on material here, *The Great Escape* was doomed from the outset. Add to that the continual distractions of picking up awards for *Parklife* meant that recording sessions lacked focus.

Under pressure to make *Parklife Vol.2*, Albarn moved away from soul-baring songs to concentrate on character studies (*Charmless Man, Mr Robinson's Quango, Dan Abnormal*). The patronising tone of many of them added weight to accusations that Blur were aloof piss-takers – the mirror image of Oasis' Everyman authenticity. *Country House* won the battle with *Roll With It* but they lost the war when compared to *(What's The Story) Morning Glory?*.

A love of The Specials feeds into the brassy *Fade Away* but everything else is put in the shade by stellar standout *The Universal*, a grandiose sweeping ballad.

Only poignant closer *Yuko And Hiro* ("We are never together, I'll love you for ever), most likely about relationship struggles with Frischmann, finds Albarn returning to a more honest songwriting style.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Released
11 Sept 1995
Label Food, Virgin
Chart Position
UK No.1 and
US No.150

Blur's own *Achtung Baby* where the band rip up everything they ever knew and start from scratch; a scorched earth policy which marked a breathtaking reinvention. Ironically, their *volte-face* saw them transform into the kind of US-influenced alt-indie rock band they'd previously kicked so vigorously against on their preceding Anglocentric trilogy. Graham Coxon's love of Pavement finally won through, ushering in with it a much grittier sound, rough around the edges.

This Year Zero policy to their history (even the album title suggested that they were beginning all over again) coincided with their best collection of material to date. *Blur* spins all over the map, but, despite its experimentalism, hits the bullseye every time.

Pleasingly, their fans went with them for the ride, too. It topped the charts in the UK and *Song 2* helped break the band in the States, shifting a healthy 700,000 copies of the LP.

Despite struggling with a drink problem, a re-energised Coxon is in inspired form throughout and Albarn returns to a more personal style of songwriting, eschewing the character-based material for the most part.

Coxon claimed he wanted to "scare people again" with his music and after previously finding little in common with the guitarist's lo-fi tastes, Damon admitted in an interview with *Select* magazine: "I can sit at my piano and write brilliant observational pop songs all day long but you've got to move on."

Recorded in London and Reykjavik, where Albarn now had a home, the band built up songs from jam sessions for the first time rather than the disciplined studio performances they'd previously undertaken.

Beetlebum, the first taste of the album, displayed a subtle reinvention; Coxon's sly guitar riff and Albarn's woozy vocals and lyrics, alluding to the latter's experiences smoking heroin. Blur's central pairing were in a dark place in their personal lives but managed to turn that into wonderful art.

Blockbuster second single *Song 2* remains one of the greatest 120 seconds of unadulterated joyousness in modern music; its gonzo ubiquity at the time meant they were known as 'The Woo-Hoo! Band' in the States for a while.

"THEIR VOLTE FACE SAW THEM TRANSFORM INTO A US-INFLUENCED ALT-INDIE ROCK BAND"

Coxon's unconventional soloing style sparkles in *Country Sad Ballad Man* and his guitar sounds more like a squealing electric drill for *Movin' On*.

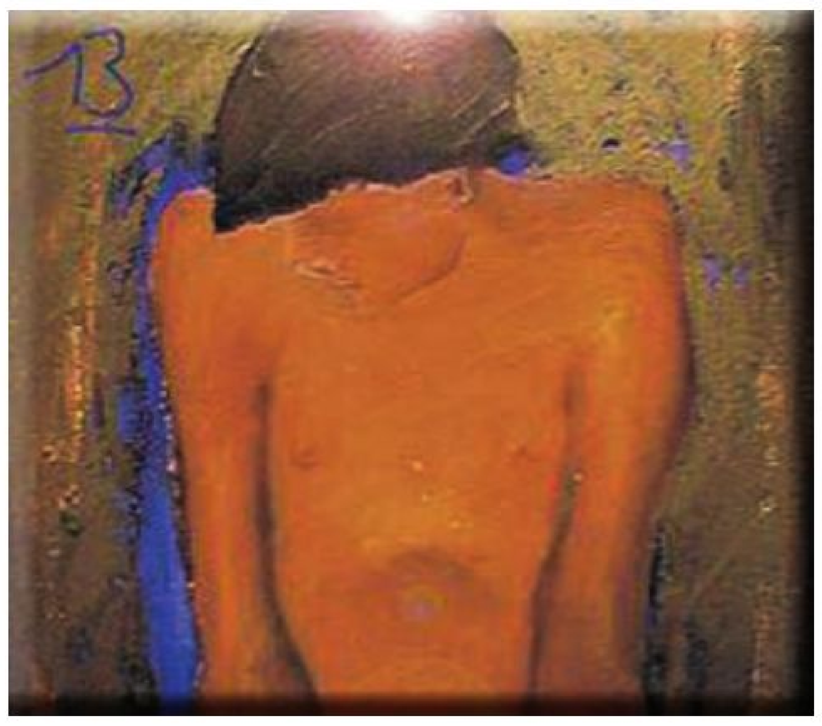
Meanwhile, the heavily treated guitar tones of *M.O.R* usher in a trademark chorus that hinted the band hadn't wholly given up their attempts at crowd-pleasing moments.

The heady, intoxicated fug at the heart of *Blur* is best evidenced in the haunted dancehall dub of *Theme From Retro* and crepuscular spoken word *Essex Dogs*. Coxon gets his own dazed showcase in the slacker strumalong *You're So Great*, foreshadowing the off-kilter pop of *Coffee & TV*.

In the main, Blur sound like they are working in an all-consuming vacuum here, satisfying themselves rather than chasing hits. Only the *Space Oddity*-era Bowie homage *Strange News From Another Star* wore its influences brazenly on its sleeve.

As a fully-rounded musical statement, this was far superior to *Parklife* and its predecessors.

BLUR
Released 10 Feb 1997
Label Food
Chart Position
UK No.1 and No.61



Splintered relationships gnaw away at *13*, but somehow Blur still manage to mine gold from the emotional fall-out.

For the first time in their history, the band recorded an album without the assistance of producer Stephen Street, unanimously opting to bring in former Madonna collaborator William Orbit to push them into new sonic terrain.

Moreover, though, the pre-eminent break-up that drives *13* is the one between Albarn and Justine Frischmann, drolly dubbed by journalist John Harris the "proto-Posh and Becks for the indie-rock constituency."

In the *No Distance Left To Run* documentary Albarn confided: "That relationship just absolutely crashed. I mean, it really was a spectacularly sad end."

Damon channelled the heartbreak into some of his most remarkable songs to date, particularly career-high ballad *Tender*, arguably his greatest achievement as a songwriter. All at once he managed to conjure up something with a nursery rhyme-like simplicity, allied with a gospel-infused sense of testifying joy – he's broken yet defiant, temporarily wounded yet looking optimistically for new love on the horizon: "Come on, get through it… Love's the greatest thing that we have/ I'm waiting for that feeling to come." It's a song of hurt, but also one of hope.

Inter-band relationships were at an all-time low. Despite Coxon winning the argument over the band's sonic direction on *Blur*, his erratic behaviour and anger at his own role within the four-piece meant recording sessions were often fractured affairs with one or more members staying away.

"There was a battle between Damon's more experimental direction, and Graham's punk one, and Graham prevailed. If that tension had been growing on previous LPs, it came to a head here," Orbit told *Uncut* magazine.

The creative tensions between Coxon and Albarn resulted in some of the guitarist's most extraordinary contributions, he sounds like he's sawing his amp in half on *Bugman* as Damon drops in a Sun Ra-referencing refrain in its coda ("Space is the place").

"DESPITE SPLINTERED RELATIONSHIPS, BLUR MINED GOLD FROM OUT OF THE EMOTIONAL FALL-OUT"

Swamp Song lives up to its murky name, the band exploring dark sonic landscapes; equally brooding is the funereal dirge *Battle*, with drummer Rowntree supplying dubby beats.

There's a skewed take on trip-hop for *Trailer Park* and yet more bold experimentation with the seven-and-a-half-minute epic *Caramel*.

But the startling parting shot here is the heart-breaking ballad *No Distance Left To Run*, Damon's bereft yet philosophical goodbye to lost love Justine: "When you see me, please turn your back and walk away/ I don't want to see you, 'cause I know the dreams that you keep is wearing me." Albarn reportedly broke down in tears as he recorded his vocals on the track. Alongside *Tender*, this is where he achieved true greatness as an emotive songwriter. His arched character studies far inferior to these soul-baring gems. As a heart-rending sugar-free ballad writer, Albarn has few equals among his peers.

13
Released 15 Mar 1999
Label Food, Parlophone
Chart Position
UK No.1 and US No.80

The runt in the Blur litter. After years of rancour, Graham Coxon finally leaves the band amid much acrimony. On the finished album, he's heard on just the one track, the mournful lump-in-the-throat *Battery In Your Leg*.

Think Tank eventually becomes an album of defiance – could Blur actually make a record without the input of their mercurial guitarist? The end result was a compromised success; arguably much of the record sounds more like Gorillaz than Blur (Albarn's cartoon side project broke worldwide in 2001, much to the chagrin of his old bandmates).

Man of the moment, superstar DJ Fatboy Slim was drafted in to produce the airhead fun of *Crazy Beat* and gimmicky *Gene By Gene*, but the high points are mostly found elsewhere.

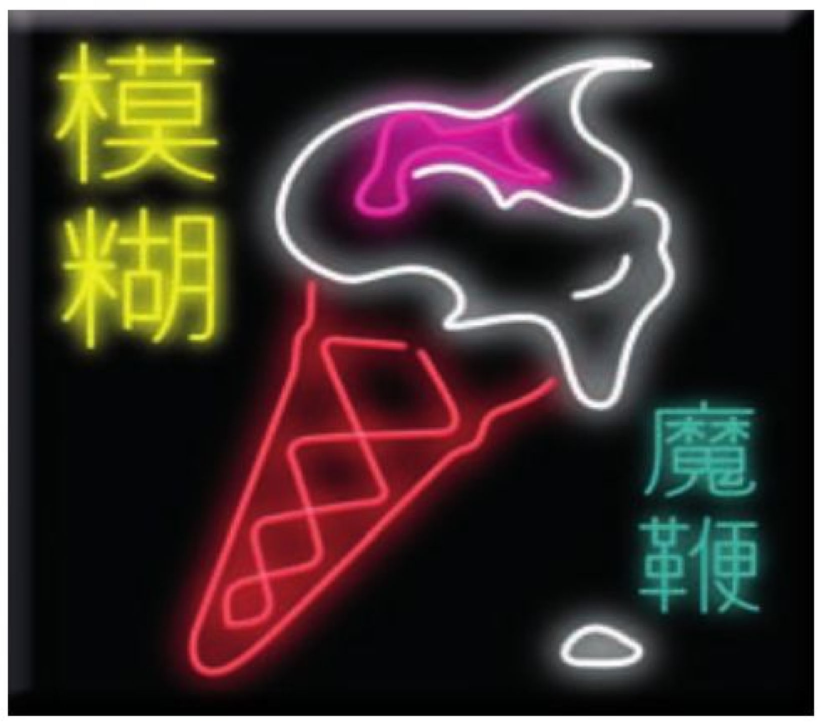
Recording sessions really took flight when the band decamped to Marrakesh; there's a wonderful easy-going North African charm to LP highlight *Out Of Time*, the fabulously-titled freewheeling funk of *Moroccan Peoples Revolutionary Bowls Club* and wiry *Brothers And Sisters*. Albarn sensibly avoids trying to take on Coxon's role as guitarist for the most part, filling the void with an array of electronica textures and nuanced production flourishes.

Only the obligatory punky thrash of *We've Got A File On You* attempts to rock up a storm. Instead, much of *Think Tank*'s finest moments are muted, such as the hope-filled *Ambulance*, the yearning *Good Song* and plaintive *Sweet Song*.

Often overlooked when considering the band's history, *Think Tank* is certainly worthy of reappraisal.

THINK TANK

Released 5 May 2003
Label Parlophone
Chart Position
UK No.1 and US No.56



AKA The Redemption of Graham Coxon. When organisers cancelled the Tokyo Rocks music festival that Blur were due to play at in May 2013, the band were stranded in Hong Kong for five days.

They spent that time remarkably productively, though, holing up in a studio and cutting 15 rough tracks of brand new material.

These remained untouched for 18 months before Coxon decided to revisit them with producer Stephen Street. Further secret sessions were completed with Alex James and Dave Rowntree before the finished backing tracks were presented to Albarn as something worthy of making into a full album. Damon then returned to Hong Kong for further lyrical inspiration and vocals were laid down in January 2015.

Despite its piecemeal creation, *The Magic Whip* was an absolute triumph on every level. Belying its title, opener *Lonesome Street* is prime, upbeat melodic Blur and *New World Towers* another of Albarn's introspective top-drawer ballads.

The wonky *Ice Cream Man* brings in some of the Far Eastern influences and the integration of electronica into *Thought I Was A Spaceman* feels like a bold new direction for the band.

Meanwhile, with *My Terracotta Heart* they revisited the kind of bruised beauty that Damon mined so well on his *Everyday Robots* solo album.

THE MAGIC WHIP

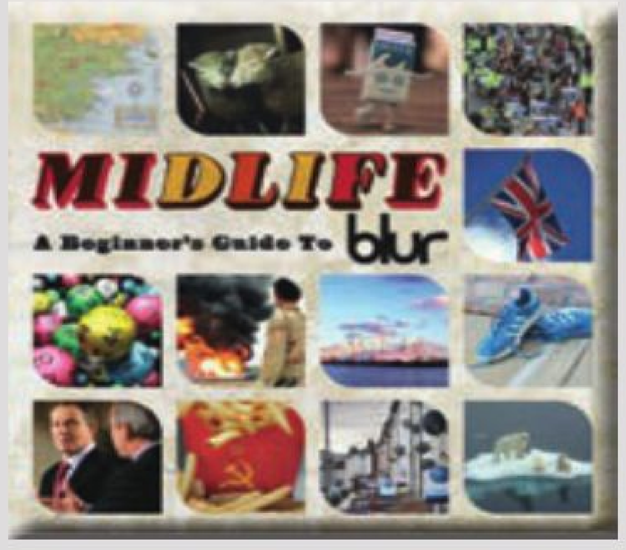
Released 27 April 2015
Label Parlophone, Warner Bros.
Chart Position
UK No.1 and US No.24

COMPILATIONS & REMIX LPs...

BUSTIN' + DRONIN'

1998

An A-list crew of producers duff up the already skewed world of Blur's masterpiece self-titled album from 1997. Released just over a year later, these are often radical reworkings of the originals; Adrian Sherwood adds dubby atmospherics to *Death Of A Party* and William Orbit reinvents *On Your Own* as wired synth-punk. Moby turns *Beetlebum* into the kind of electro blues he was immersed in at the time and, boldest of all, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore recasts *Essex Dogs* as an experimental effects-laden guitar rock art installation with Damon's isolated vocal providing extra drama.



MIDLIFE: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO BLUR

2009

You can't really go wrong with the faultless 15-track *Blur: The Best Of* released in 2000 but this compilation nine years later adds a little more depth and subtlety to their illustrious story. It goes off-piste for the wistful *Blue Jeans* and darkly atmospheric *Death Of A Party*; *Popscene* – the song that almost derailed their career – remains a bristling clatter. It also brings the story almost up to date with the inclusion of *Think Tank* standouts *Out Of Time* and *Battery In Your Leg*. However, you'll have to put your dancing shoes away, baggy banger *There's No Other Way* fails to make the cut.

LIVE LPs...

LIVE AT THE BUDOKAN

1996

Up until their run of high-profile reunion shows, this was the only officially released Blur live album. Recorded in November 1995 while promoting *The Great Escape*, this catches the band at the apex of their Britpop fame. Raucous fun with great melodies to boot.

ALL THE PEOPLE: BLUR LIVE AT HYDE PARK

2009

One of a pair of live albums for Blur's celebratory London reunion shows, reaction to the band's comeback was an extraordinarily emotional affair. All the hits are here plus some deeper cuts for the Blur faithful to embrace.

PARKLIVE

2012

Blighted by Hyde Park's notorious noise restrictions, this sound board mix is a vast improvement on the experience of being there in person. A companion show to London's 2012 Olympics Closing Ceremony, Blur assert their national treasure status here with an emotive gig.

Modern Times

One of the best post-grunge pop bands Britain had to offer, Sleeper were undervalued at the height of Britpop for daring to have a charismatic frontwoman songwriter. Back, after 22 years, with a sparkling new album, singer Louise Wener and drummer Andy MacLure tell **John Earls** why they refuse to get too cosy after being away for so long

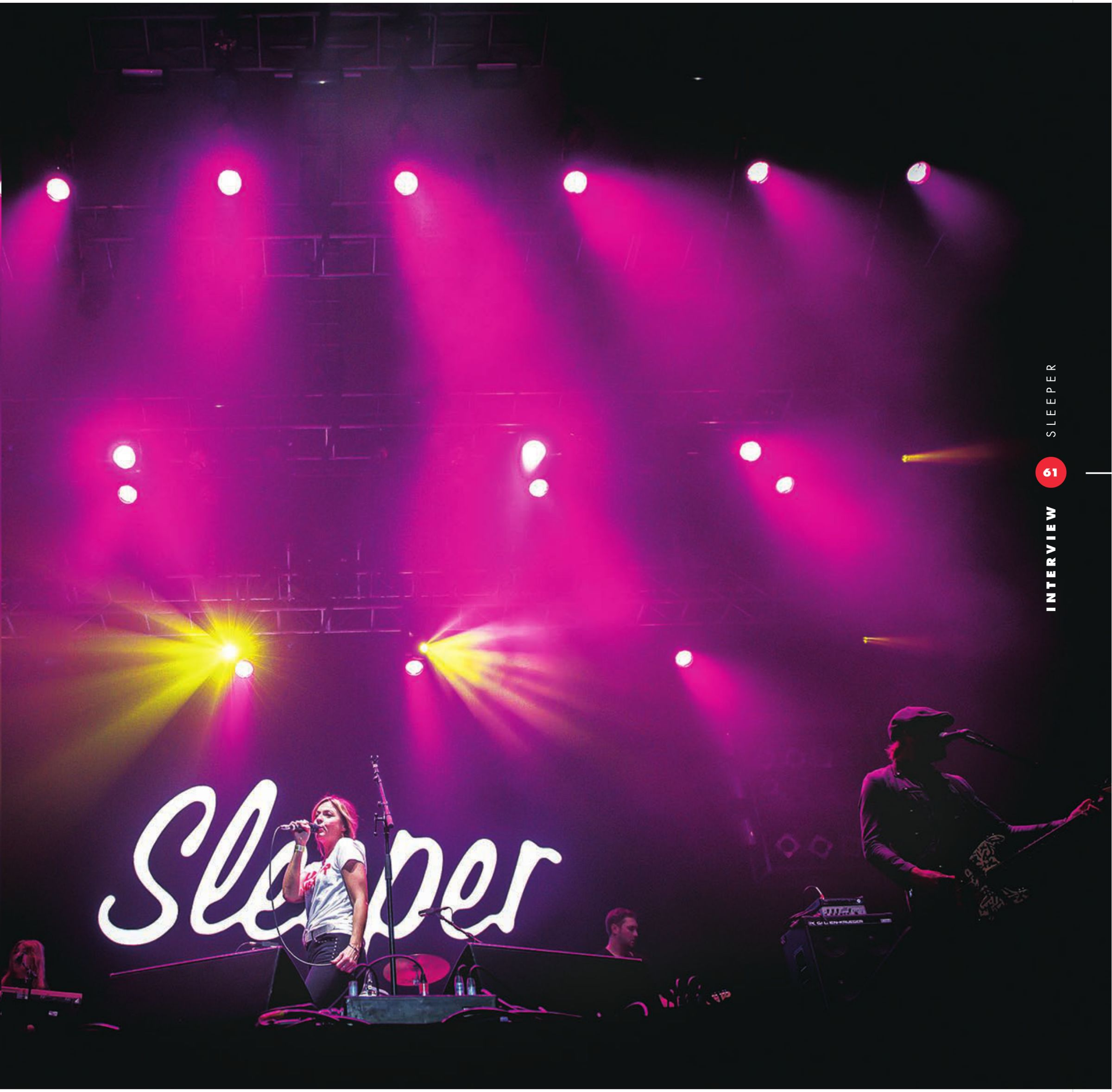
In just two years, Sleeper scored three Top 10 albums. In some ways, they were the ultimate Britpop band: their singer was a quote magnet, their hits such as *Inbetweener* and *Sale Of The Century* were snappy and memorable. But, perhaps because Louise Wener wasn't male, there was resentment towards Sleeper, too.

"The music press was so leaden and serious back then," sighs Louise. "It was hard to get any humour across. There was a basic sexism, too; this fake shock of, 'Oh, it's a woman at the helm! Writing the songs!' Because of that, the men in the band had to be diminished in some way." Most obviously, that was in the term 'Sleeperbloke'. Coined initially to describe Louise's bandmates, guitarist Jon Stewart, drummer Andy MacLure and bassist Diid Osman, Sleeperbloke soon became shorthand for any supposedly anonymous man in a female-fronted band.

"The term Sleeperbloke would never have been used about anyone in an all-male band," says Louise. "Most bands have a charismatic lead singer, it's the job! The other guys are automatically in the background by comparison. In the 90s, the offers were, 'We'll put Sleeper on the cover, but only if it's a picture of just Louise'. So as a band, we were constantly involved in a lot of horrible bartering."

It seems cruel that, as soon as Sleeper announced vital comeback album *The Modern Age*, a quiz from joke site Monkeon went viral asking people to guess the band from the anonymous Sleeperbloke. There was at least one important difference in the 2019 version. "This time, there were all-male bands deemed to include Sleeperblokes," notes Andy MacLure. "It didn't used to be like that: Only female-fronted bands had Sleeperblokes in the 90s. It was a terrible, misogynistic way of operating. I thought that viral quiz was quite funny, though. I scored 10/10 on it – those band members are my people, after all."

If the reappearance of the dread phrase was a reminder of the dubious side of what Sleeper are re-entering in 2019, most of their return has been an unalloyed triumph. After Sleeper split, Wener wrote four novels and her autobiography, while MacLure became a producer and session musician. Jon Stewart was first to turn to academia, lecturing in music history at Brighton music industry college BIMM. MacLure now works at BIMM, as well, while Wener has also lectured, in a course on how to write novels: "I was probably more nervous on my first day lecturing to a class of students than I was going out on stage in front of 2,000 people." ▶


Sleeper

Sleeper's current line-up (L-R): Jon Stewart, Andy MacLure, Louise Wener, Kieron Pepper

Louise and Andy became a couple at the height of Sleeper, and now have a daughter aged 13 and an 11-year-old son. They moved to Brighton when Louise was pregnant with their second child, feeling it was a better place than London to raise a family.

SOUNDCHECKS REVISITED

The idea of reforming a band that had ended messily was far from their minds. "If you'd asked me two years ago about a new Sleeper album, I'd have said it was never going to happen," admits MacLure. Wener eventually deleted any emails asking Sleeper to reform without bothering to read them. "I'd found another creative way to earn a living," she explains. "I couldn't see how music could fit with that and bringing up a family. I felt I'd had to turn my back on music completely, because otherwise it'd eat away at me. But I'd occasionally go to a great gig and get emotional, because I did miss it. I missed the colours of the musician's life: soundcheck, being backstage, rehearsal rooms. I might be the only musician who loves rehearsing."

At the start of 2017, someone close to Wener fell ill, making the singer think she shouldn't be so quick to write off the idea of performing again. "Sleeper had ended in a big old mess," she explains. "The opportunity to redefine that part of our lives, let us make sense of what it all meant, began to appeal. What was happening made me think, 'Let's just do it and see how it feels, because we might not have that chance again.' Being in a band was massively outside our comfort zone by then, but that was exactly the appeal."

Stewart hadn't picked up a guitar in a decade, but MacLure had continued to play music as well as mentoring students as head of artist development at BIMM. "At the start, I help bands figure out their direction, and if they're already doing well I'll help choose a producer and with the marketing side," he explains. Past students have included James Bay and indie quartet Black Honey, whose eponymous debut album went Top 40 last September. Another, Aimee Smith, is now Sleeper's live keyboardist. Andy continues: "I'd stayed involved in music, so I didn't think playing with Sleeper again was going to be that big a deal. But it was. As soon as we were in the room making music again, we were those same people."

The only missing Sleeperite is Diid Osman, but not because of any lingering animosity. His replacement is Kieron Pepper, a multi-instrumentalist who is The Prodigy's live drummer and a lecturer at BIMM with MacLure and Stewart. "Diid just doesn't live

RECORD SALE OF THE CENTURY

Louise Wener and Andy MacLure name their pick of Brighton's record shops

Brighton residents Wener and MacLure speak highly of the town's myriad record shops. "It's amazing for vinyl shopping," says MacLure.

"It's great to see how Resident has expanded, as it shows how successful a shop can still be when you get it right. It's integral to the music community in Brighton."

The drummer names Wax Factor as his favourite shop, saying: "Not only does it have a ton of great records, but it's got a 50s-themed café and a book section. That's all I could want from a shop, plus the guys at the counter will sit and chat about records for ages."

Wener admits she doesn't go record shopping as often, saying: "BC Camplight and Parquet Courts were the last records I bought. I got them from Resident, which is such a great shop. What I like about record shopping now is the range of music everyone loves. It was more tribal when Sleeper first made music. I found that quite hard, when you had to name your favourite 10 B-sides by The Fall or else you weren't allowed to join the club."

> "Being in a band again was massively outside our comfort zone, but that was the appeal"

anywhere near us," says Wener. "We've all got families and it's easier to organise childcare with Kieron! The most convenient place to write and record turned out to be our attic." Andy adds: "Kieron is the most positive person I know. The rest of us don't trust that, as we're quite negative in general, whereas Kieron has a boundless energy. We thought we might need that, because of the delicacy of getting a band back together after 20 years."

SUCH A HARD ARSE

The comeback began with four shows for Britpop festival Star Shaped, where Sleeper played with The Bluetones, Space and Dodgy. "My legs were shaking," recalls Louise. "Not through fear so much as my body couldn't compute I was about to do this again."

The crowds' delighted responses overwhelmed Sleeper, who soon decided they needed to return properly. "Loud and energetic music is what's always driven me," says Louise, now 52. "One of the thrills of standing onstage with the band is when it's so fricking loud. That rush is addictive, and it hasn't changed just because we're older." That informed *The Modern Age*, Sleeper's most consistent and consistently energetic record. "It was born of frustration, anger and a bit of darkness in what I was going through. I love loud music, and I didn't want our return to have any cosy feeling to it. I certainly wasn't feeling cosy." The first song to emerge was *Blue Like You*, a fantastic whirlwind about social media addiction. "A lot of the record was chucking out songs," laughs Andy, 48. "That was painful for me, as I'd put loads of clever ideas into a song only for Louise to go: 'Yeah, but it's not as good as *Blue Like You*'. It's been so great working with Louise like this again. She's such a hard arse about the standard of our songs."

It was a process that reminded Wener why she'd fallen in love with being in a band. She's refreshingly honest that, before the reality of the music industry was revealed, she'd primarily wanted to be famous. "I'd thought that, if I got to be famous, it would cure everything," she admits. "And then I didn't like being famous very much. I thought the music industry would be an incredible, liberal

NICE GUY GEORGE

Recording with a pop legend

After Sleeper split, Wener began making a solo album. Written with MacLure, it was produced at George Michael's studio by his engineers, Niall Flynn and James Jackman. The pair worked with Michael from classic hit *Outside* until his final album, 2014 live set *Symphonica*. "We'd done some programming with them," explains MacLure. "George was even involved with the album, doing some harmonies, bless him." Described by MacLure as "chilled and down-tempo", the couple admit the album was shaping up to be too far away from Sleeper to pursue, especially with Wener writing her first novel and MacLure striking out as a producer and session musician.

When Sleeper reformed, they pondered completing those unfinished songs as the basis for their comeback album. "We quickly decided that was a daft idea," Wener admits. "We needed to write about how we feel now and the world around us as it is, otherwise it wouldn't have any resonance." Album closer *Big Black Sun* is based on a song from those 1999 solo sessions. "There was some lovely stuff in those songs," says MacLure.

Louise Wener captured on stage during the band's Britpop heyday

environment, when it felt conservative and alienating." It didn't help that Sleeper were signed to Indolent, a BMG subsidiary who frustrated the band at every turn. When fourth single *Inbetweener* was Sleeper's first hit in 1995, it stalled at No.16 because Indolent's marketing manager went on holiday and the label were so surprised by its success that they weren't able to press enough copies. "Sleeper were an experiment for Indolent, and they didn't run the experiment very well," notes Louise wryly. "All we could do was write songs we loved, but 20 other people had to do their jobs right for things to work. Most of the time, they didn't." She soon tired of being a go-to quote machine. "It'd be disingenuous if I tried to say I didn't know I was good at interviews

> "A book is a year of wrestling 100,000 words, whereas a song can be done in an afternoon"

and that I knew that had a currency," she says. "But we were caught in the crossfire of knowing all that, while at the same time knowing how any humour would look bad at print. Interviews with musicians these days are so often incredibly careful. Back then, we'd just go to pubs, get drunk, chat about all sorts and only afterwards think, 'God, that's going to sound bad'. I thought being on magazine covers would be brilliant, and writing songs to get there would be the hard work. The opposite was true."

Instead, the highs of 90s Sleeper were from the musical side: "Being on a tourbus in America and waking up to find yourself in Texas." Wener recalls writing *Sale Of The Century* with MacLure and celebrating by walking on Hampstead Heath as the sun was coming up. "I thought, 'We've written this amazing song together," she enthuses. "Moments like that are the things I've kept with me."

That elation from writing a great song is back decades later. It's certainly a more immediate thrill than writing a novel. "A book is a year of wrestling with 100,000 words," says Wener. "You're stuck in your room for ages in your jogging bottoms trying to finish something, but a song can be done in an afternoon. I'd forgotten that adrenaline rush of something happening fast. Most of the songs on *The Modern Age* came quickly. That's always been the case with me, that the songs I labour over are the ones that never make it. It's a funny subconscious effect, where it brings something forward that works in its entirety."

MacLure's students at BIMM, meanwhile, were surprised he was back performing. "Doing this record has been useful for realising what releasing a record involves now," he chuckles. "I try to help students focus on how to release a record, and I've learned quite a lot about that in the past six months. There's no team around us this time, which is great. We can't blame anyone else if it doesn't go to plan."

If MacLure's students are surprised at his return to Sleeper, his and Wener's two children don't know what to make of it. "Their teachers are asking about it at school," smiles Wener. "They get a sense of kudos from that, then they come home and go, 'I can't believe you're doing this, it's so embarrassing!' They think it's both cool and mortifying, and that's exactly the right way to be. Our son is totally uninterested in playing music, while our daughter is slightly more into the idea. We've tried everything in our power to get them not to join a band and told them the folly of it."

The Modern Age is out on 22 March. Sleeper tour from 21 March to 13 April

SLEEPER 2.0

One of the few drawbacks of Sleeper 2.0 has been funding the record through PledgeMusic, only to withdraw from the crowdfunding site in December once its financial problems began emerging. "Thousands of people funded our album a year in advance," says Wener. "Having that faith in us was so touching. PledgeMusic seemed a simple arrangement with no complications. That it's turned out it's run in a financially perilous fashion is so disappointing. There's a bit of a feeling of 'Not again', because we'd signed up to PledgeMusic specifically because we had the control of not going through a record company." MacLure adds: "I hope PledgeMusic gets sorted, as it's a great platform for grassroots acts. Many of my students have worked with them. A lot of acts who can't afford to press vinyl copies of their album can once they get £1,500 funding via PledgeMusic. That automatically takes their album to the next level, because now it can be stocked in indies such as Resident Music and Rough Trade."

While MacLure ponders "doing something different next" and Wener vows to carry on making music "in some context", the couple agree it won't be another 22 years before the fifth Sleeper album. "We've been given the chance to write again," summarises Wener. "It'd be foolish to waste that." ●

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